

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

SERIR MORTAD, Ilhem
Université de Tlemcen

Résumé :

There is nothing more sublime and serviceable to human beings than literary language which engenders different levels of formality and conceivable varieties of language. Literature is, as a whole, an artistically organised system specially bringing ordinary talk in contact with formal literary language. Henceforth, linguists become more and more drifted towards a collection of different slips of the tongue and the Arab linguist Al-Kisa'i was among the first linguists who wrote an interesting book entitled 'Error of the Populace'.

The issue we would like to raise in this article may be summarized in the following question:

How can literary language offer diversity in English and Arabic standard texts?

In both Arabic and English literature, the writers tend to include dialectal forms in a standard artistic text. In spite of its richness, Classical Arabic, *al fusha*, cannot always be useful for some characters who are ignorant or uneducated. Similarly, Standard English cannot be used by a character who has never been to school. On this basis, this paper aims at clarifying the following points:

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

- there is a strong relationship between language and literature
- this relationship implies other components such as dialect and culture
- this relationship is intensified by a scientific research about dialect in literature.

In short, this paper attempts to shed light upon dialectal phenomena in English and Arabic literature as demonstrated in English and Arabic standard literary texts; and mainly targets on the importance of the function of dialects in the literature of both languages.

Dialect use in literature is a highly controversial problematic for it is quite unusual to include a variety of spoken language within the standard form. Still, at the same time, it is almost paradoxical to make the uneducated character speak *al-fusha* in Arabic, or the one from a lower class use a highly soigné English.

1. The Importance of Dialect Use in Literature

Being faithful to the rules of rhetoric language of fiction and, at the same time, to the spontaneous dialect in reality, the literary man is caught in a dilemma of what is most convenient to write responding to the rules of aesthetics that literature tends to rely on for the sake of beauty and, in the meantime, respond to the principles of realism that today's literature has a tendency to adopt. Knowing that any piece of literature may be kept secret, almost dead without language, it is certain that "literature is no doubt the privileged realm in which language is exercised, clarified and modified" Kristeva (1989:287)

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

In the matter of simple sentence or even a single word, the writer becomes a judge of what is best coping; who is more convenient; what is much matching the member from a particular community; his or her social relationship, interaction, addressee, and cultural background. As a matter of fact, as Warren and Wellek (1978:105) rightly observe, “literature is a social institution, using as its medium language... literature occurs only in a social context, as part of a culture in a milieu”.

Recently, a new science called Literary Dialectology has emerged and is developing in the field of language studies. Whether in English or Arabic, the writer is predisposed to be an artist and a linguist including in his/her text different levels of language from formal to informal, standard to dialect, written to oral, to enrich the literary text in style and language. This allows different varieties to be incorporated together in the literary text side by side with the standard or the privileged literary language because “people appreciating novels, poetry, drama, characteristically examine the way in which those particular forms use different language styles to represent human experience”. Finch (2003:208)

Literary dialect is no longer seen as a rude form of speech and action, but rather as a natural human behaviour of colossal significance in literature, since it is a means of communicating beautiful and sweet ideas sometimes difficult to express through the standard language.

2. Dialect use in English Literature

There is an agreement among scholars about the fact that literary language should include different levels of expression from every-day speech to the high variety of a language for the reason that the “literary text is almost the only context where different varieties of language can be mixed and still admitted” Bromfit and Carter (2000:8).

The development of such phenomenon of dialect use in literature has been rooted since G. Chaucer who was known for his use of the East Midland variety, as in, *so faren we, if I shal sege* meaning ‘so far we, if I shall see’. In this respect, Scott and Machan (1992:64) think that “there remains a great deal of work to be done on the sociolinguistic significance of Chaucer’s lexis”.

Moreover, Shakespeare, the great playwright, is an appropriate example to give about the different varieties incorporated in a single play sometimes. Turner (1973: 157) says that “a writer may use dialects, not his own, as Chaucer does in the Reeve’s Tale, or may bring several dialects together as Shakespeare does in Henry V, act III, scene2”. Shakespeare was very interested in the depiction of various rustic characters, mainly those using the South Western speech variety. The word *fullen*, for example, and the expression *break thy mind to me* in ‘broken’ English are used in *Henry V*. He liked to include exponents of dialects in his plays, mainly because the qualities of drama as a literary form helps to cover the author’s voice better than in poetry in order to make the words fit the character’s social and cultural background in a realistic and natural way.

In the 18th century and onwards, dialect use in literature began to be more extensive and remarkable

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

English writers used dialectal forms in their writing. W. Scott, who had a real sense towards vivid and popular dialogues as showed in his novel *Heart of Midlothian*, insisted on this type of speech with the purpose of showing “the central conflict...between the peasant world of the deanses and the more sophisticated but more uncertain world of the city...the relation of Scotland to the English state” Kettle (1962:25).

It goes without saying that other English writers – especially Victorian ones – contributed to a large extent in the enrichment of British literature thanks to the use of dialectal forms. Mrs Gaskell, for instance, by using Lancashire speech, does not hesitate to offer helpful reading aids to help the non-speakers of her dialect understand some Lancashire grammar and pronunciation.

G. Eliot and T. Hardy are also good examples of writers who retain dialectal forms in their novels because in this period:

Novelists became more skilful in representing the registers and varieties of speech; dialect, previously used mainly for comic or eccentric effect, was given by writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy to be serious and even tragic.

Arthur (1996:275)

Especially in her first novels, G. Eliot, who was brought up in the rural areas of the Midlands, did not hesitate to include such rustic landscapes in the setting and she insisted on preserving the Midland dialect in her novels, *Adam Bede*, *the Mill on the floss* and *Silas Marner*, when she makes the countryside folks speak to

each other. T. Hardy, for his part, insisted on the use of the Dorset variety in most of his novels because “he valued and defended the dignity of Dorset usage which he saw not as a deviation from the national standard but as a survival of the ancient speech of Saxon Wessex” *ibid* (1996:425).

In addition to D.H. Lawrence, who was famous for having included the Nottinghamshire dialect to reflect the miners’ speech who did not speak the English of London, G.B. Shaw also used a dialect for the “low characters, in several plays, but seriously examined the social problem of dialect in *Pygmalion*” Turner (1973:162).

3. Dialect use in Arabic Literature

The phenomenon of dialect use in Arabic literature is, to some extent, different in English literature mainly because the two types of literature are of different history, culture and origin. When we use the term *Arabic* we may refer to “literary Arabic” or to the different varieties of Arabic. In point of fact, the literary language is of special nature in the sense that it varies between the standard high variety and the dialectal low variety which understandably creates a diglossic situation in the literary text. This is due to the importance of non-standard forms of language that some low-level folks and uneducated characters impose on the writer to be authentically sensible when making such people speak.

It is quite odd and strange to make an illiterate person speak the same way as an educated one; then, the text loses its authenticity and reality. For this reason, many Arab writers tend to use different forms of dialect

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

in the literary text without being impeded by the normative rules of *el fusha*.

In fact the language/dialect dichotomy was already noticed and commented on in the pre-Islamic period when the Arabs were conscious of dialectal differences. Nevertheless, in spite of their awareness of the fact, they could not develop a scientific study of dialectal variation – as did the French, the German and the English.

In his book *El Kitab*, Sibawayh illustrates different forms of dialectal differences starting by the Qur'an which could be read in a number of ways, as mentioned in one of the Prophet's *hadiths*, "Read it in seven ways"

اقرأوه على سبعة أحرف

Sibawayh also studied some Prophet's sayings (pbuh) characterised by dialectal uses spoken in various areas primordially divided into Bedouin (like the *Tamim* tribe) and urban tribes (like the tribe of *El Hijaz*). Most Bedouin tribes, for example, adopted the glottal stop known as *hamza* همزة, saying /sa?ala/ سأل 'he asked', whereas urban tribes tend to leave it out from glottalised words and pronounce the verb /sa:la/ سال . He showed another dialectal variation as adapted by some people, called Beni Sa'ad, who pronounce the letter ياء /j/ as ا جيم [ž]; the name عليّ *Ali*, for example, is realized *Alij* عالج .

History witnesses many excerpts of oral culture told from one generation to another in a natural language called dialect as shown by Ibn Mekki el Sakali, Ibn el Zoubaydi and Ibn el Jouzi.

As for the use of dialects in Arab literature, many different opinions are considered; El Akkad disagrees with any form of dialect in Arabic literature even in

speech and insists on making the difference between the language of science and literature as opposed to popular language, the language of non-educated people. Through time, however, and thanks to the evolution of language studies, scholars have begun to think that if ever the writer switches to a dialectal form in an eloquent text, he has to maintain it as it is for the sake of authenticity and genuineness because, as Mortad (1994:310) says, “if all the Arabs used the same way of speaking and the same structures we would not perceive any dialectal differences, and those who came after them would not have had the opportunity to notice these differences at various levels”¹

”لو كان العرب كلهم يستعملون نفس الأقوال ونفس التراكيب لما تصورنا عندها فوارق لهجية، ولما أتيج لمن جاء بعدهم أن يلحظوا هذه الفوارق في مختلف المستويات.“ (مرتاض 1994:310)

However, the problem of dialect use in literature arouses a firing discussion among scholars and authors, who are divided into three main groups: some call for the absolute use of *el fusha* in the literary text to maintain the Arab union, whereas others think that dialect use in literature is essential to be nearer to the public. The third group prefer to be in-between in the sense that the writer has the choice to use the standard in certain contexts and a given dialect when necessary because, as Messaief (1974) writes, “the requirements of art and realism are not based on ideas only but on the language as well. This is why, it is primordial for the novelist not to ignore the difference between the characters involved in the

¹ My translation of the Arabic text.

conversation. In fact, it is unnatural to use one language and one level of thought”²

"متطلبات الفن والواقعية لا تقوم على الأفكار وحدها بل تقوم كذلك على اللغة مما يفرض على القاصّ ألا يتجاهل اختلاف الشخصيات التي يجري بينها الحوار... فإنه من غير الطبيعي أن تستخدم لغة واحدة ومستوى واحد من التفكير" (محمد مصايف 1974:382)

The Arab writer tends to include dialectal forms in the dialogue because the latter requires short sentences and vivid expressions to make a dynamic and simple language that suits the nature of speech. Michael Noua'ayma uses two varieties of Arabic in his novel *Parents and children* الآباء والأبناء ; the *fus-ha* for the educated characters and the dialect for the illiterate ones. Also, because the novelist Abdelkarim Ghallab recognizes the dynamic and vividness of the dialect, he uses many non-standard expressions in his novel *Life of the past* دنيا الماضي.

The objective of dialect use in literature is the artistic realism that the modern novel has recently called for. The Algerian novel too is rich with colloquial speech: Abdelhamid Hadouga has used many Algerian dialectal forms in the dialogues of his novel *The wind of the South*, ريح الجنوب, and so has the novelist Tahar Watar in his international novel entitled *al Laz* - particularly in order to make non-educated characters talk to each other. Actually, the presence of dialectal use seems to be increasing in modern Arabic literature; and the point we would wish to make is that the richness of Colloquial Arabic – which includes a great number of

² My translation.

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

varieties extending from the Maghreb to the Mashreq (Western and Eastern Arabic varieties) – contributes to the richness of Arabic literature as a whole, as it allows the expression of so many feelings and behaviours that would certainly not be conveyed in Standard Arabic.

All in all, dialect use in literature, whether English or Arabic, is more and more frequent among writers in the literary field with the development of language studies in Sociolinguistics and dialectology because they are aware that “literary language, almost entirely written, will not be appreciated in depth if we stop thinking about speech altogether” Chapman (1989:33)

For everything that has been said so far it should be clear that our work is by no means exhaustive, and whatever has been done about language and its varieties, the field of scientific investigation in dialect in relation to literature seems to be largely unexplored.

References

English sources

- ARTHUR, T. Mac. 1996. *Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- BROMFIT, C.J., CARTER, R.A. 2000. *Literature and Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- CHAPMAN, R. 1989. *Linguistics and Literature: An Introduction to literary stylistics*. Great Britain: Edward Arnold.
- FINCH, G. 2003. *How To Study Linguistics: A Guide to Understanding language*. Great Britain: Penguin Books

Dialectal Phenomena in English and Arabic Literature

- KETTLE, A. 1962. *An Introduction To The English Novel*. Great Britain: Pelican.
- KRISTEVA, J. translated by Menke, A.M. 1989. *Language the Unknown: An Introduction into Linguistics* Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- MACHAN. T.W., Scott.C.T.1992. *English in its Social Contexts*. New York. Oxford University Press.
- TURNER, G.W.1973. *Stylistcs*. London : Penguin Books.
- WARREN, A. and WELLEK, R. 1978. *Theory of Literature*. Penguin Books.

Arabic sources

- عبد الجليل مرتاض / دراسات سانتكسية لللهجات العربية القديمة، رسالة دكتوراه، 1994 جامعة تلمسان.
- عبد الحميد بن هدوقة / ربح الجنوب، ، الجزائر، الشركة الوطنية للنشر والتوزيع، ط2، 1975
- سيبويه / الكتاب ، الهيئة المصرية العامة للكتاب، ج4، ط1، 1975.
- الطاهر وطار/ اللاز، الجزائر، دار ابن رشد للطباعة والنشر، ط4، 1983.
- محمد مصايف / النقد الأدبي الحديث في المغرب العربي، الجزائر، الشركة الوطنية للنشر والتوزيع، 1974 .