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**AIDA Granada:  
A Pomegranate of Arabic Varieties**

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## **ESTUDIOS DE DIALECTOLOGÍA ÁRABE, 21**

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# How Solid Is the Linguistic Basis for the Bedouin-Sedentary Split Used in the Classification of Arabic Dialects?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The linguistic dichotomy of Bedouin- and sedentary-type dialects is still commonplace in Arabic dialectology, though very few specific linguistic features have been identified hitherto as typically “Bedouin” or, more precisely, “Bedouin-only” features. For this reason and due to the major socio-demographic changes of the last decades, some scholars in the field have recently questioned the usefulness of the Bedouin-sedentary dichotomy. This paper does not claim to provide a final answer to the question posed in the title, which touches on one of the most complex issues in the linguistic history of Arabic. Rather, it aims to discuss some basic questions related to the Bedouin-sedentary split and recommends looking for further features that might help to linguistically underpin it. In particular, it questions the usefulness of “linguistic conservatism” as a major criterion for characterizing Bedouin Arabic. And it proposes to look for more “Bedouin-only” or “sedentary-only” features, for bundles of features that connect certain dialects, and for hitherto unconsidered features such as prosody. Although the commonly assumed dichotomy alone cannot provide answers to many of the open questions regarding the history of spoken Arabic, it may prove useful as a heuristic tool for explaining certain peculiarities of Arabic dialects. In particular, it may help us to understand the role nomadic people with their large-scale mobility play in the development of Arabic.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written in the frame of the *WIBARAB* project conducted within the ERC Advanced Grant 101020127 (2021-2026). The acronym stands for: What is bedouin-type Arabic? – The linguistic and socio-historical realities behind the millennia-old dichotomous concept of nomadic and sedentary people in the Middle East and North Africa.

**Keywords:** Bedouin-type Arabic, classification, historical dialectology.

Nomadic people and, in particular, Arabic-speaking Bedouins have played a great political and economic role in the MENA region for millennia. Nomads were an integral part of society alongside the two sedentary elements urbanites and farmers. The dichotomy between nomadic and sedentary people is not a Western invention or a concept of Orientalism, but instead is deeply rooted in Arabic tradition itself. One prime example is the great historian Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406), who in his famous *Muqaddima* provided valuable analysis of the important role that Bedouins played in the history of North Africa, which also includes linguistic considerations (cf. Bagatin 2019). The works of Arab grammarians frequently revolve around the topic of the pureness of Bedouin speech, and there has been ongoing metalinguistic discourse on the actual or alleged *faṣāḥa* of nomads in comparison with town dwellers (see Larcher 2018). But the question remains: Is the difference in lifestyle genuinely reflected in the history and the present of the Arabic language? Most Arabic dialectologists would likely say that it is.

The overwhelming majority of dialect descriptions provide information on whether the dialect investigated is of the Bedouin or sedentary type. According to recent findings, the nomad-sedentary division is, in fact, attested for the oldest-known strata of the language going back to the 3rd and 4th centuries CE. However, the features that separated the two groups in pre-Islamic times differed completely from what is found in later stages of Arabic (for details, see Al-Jallad 2019: 26-27).

All medieval Arabic sources confirm that the hallmark of Bedouin speech is the voiced articulation of the letter *qāf*. The book *an-Nuḡūm az-zāhira fī mulūk Miṣr wa-l-Qāhira*, written by the Egyptian historian Ibn Taḡrībīrdī in the 15th century, contains a passage which illustrates the importance of dialectal differences as using the phonological feature peculiar of Bedouin dialects can, in the worst case, even cost you your life (see Behnstedt & Woidich (2005: 42) for more details). In 1298, during the reign of Sultan an-Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāwūn, there was a revolt in Upper Egypt that was largely led by Bedouin tribes. To detect the insurgents, the Mamluk soldiers apparently used the still well-known *qāf*: *gāf* shibboleth, as one can read in his work (1963: 8/153, lines 25):

ووسّطوا نحوَ عشرة آلاف رجل، وما منهم إلا من أخذوا ماله وسبوا حريمه، فكان إذا  
ادّعى أحدٌ منهم أنه حضريّ قيل له: قُلْ «دقيق»، فإن قال: «دقيق»، بالكاف لغات العرب قُنل  
وإن قال: بالقاف المغهودة أطلق.

They placed around 10,000 men in the middle and there was not one of them whose property they had not taken and whose wives they had not captured. And if one of them claimed to be a villager (*ḥaḍarī*), it was said to him, “Say ‘flour’!” And if he said *dagīg* with *gāf* like the

Bedouins, he was killed, and if he said *daqīq* with the standard *qāf*, he was released.

Before examining further features that could be used to linguistically corroborate the Bedouin-sedentary split, it is worth recalling the historical circumstances which may have led to this dichotomy:

From the late 7th century onwards, the centres of the Arab-Islamic Empires were situated in Syria and Iraq. In these and other newly conquered regions, it is very likely that contact with non-Arabs as well as intra-Arabic dialect mixing had an enormous impact on spoken Arabic. In spite of the importance of the holy cities Mecca and Medina, the Arabian Peninsula quickly became a politically and culturally peripheral region – a fact which went hand in hand with low linguistic dynamics. Even if we doubt the stories about the impeccable language skills of the Bedouins and do not take it for granted that they still used the *iṣrāb*, these stories suggest that in the 9th century, for instance, the speech of urbanites in Iraq differed significantly from that of the nomads of Arabia. In the late 10th century, overpopulation and a certain weakness of the central powers prompted new waves of migration from the Peninsula toward the north and the west. This led to the assumption that the contemporary Bedouin dialects spoken outside of Arabia proper primarily originate from this second wave of Arabization (Versteegh 2010: 543). Although this is not unlikely, it should be viewed against the backdrop of two important facts:

(1) The speech of those Bedouins who left Arabia in the 10th century was *not* homogenous and, at least in the Mashreq, successive waves out of Arabia continued into the 19th century.<sup>2</sup>

(2) More than a millennium of contact and mixing with sedentary varieties and other Bedouin varieties led to many changes and differences among today's Bedouin-type dialects.

Under the premise that we accept the development outlined above as a useful working hypothesis, the question arises: which linguistic features do all the dialects with the “Bedouin” label have in common? Is there something like a pan-Bedouin-type Arabic, or do regional varieties obtain the “Bedouin” label more or less only by contrast to their adjacent sedentary varieties?

Still, as in the times of Ibn Khaldūn and Ibn Taġrībī, a voiced reflex of *\*q* is considered to be *the* linguistic feature shared by all Bedouin-type dialects, from Oman to Mauritania. Here the question arises of how useful a dichotomy based on just one phonological feature is. And, moreover, a feature that is now also found in the dialects of sedentary communities. To

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<sup>2</sup> Just to cite a few examples, the Mzēnah tribe migrated from the Hejaz to Sinai in the 17th century, there was large-scale migration of Šammar and ʕAnaza tribes from Central Arabia to Syria and Iraq in the early 19th century, and parts of the Rašāyda moved from NW-Arabia to Sudan and Eritrea in the mid-19th century.

put it bluntly, today the Mamluk soldiers would kill many farmers who have always been *ḥaḍarīs*, but who have adopted the voiced pronunciation from the Bedouins.

Therefore, it is no wonder that, in recent years, several well-known scholars in the field have questioned the usefulness of the Bedouin-sedentary split. Jonathan Owens (2006: 28) trenchantly remarks that dichotomies “tend to become hinges upon which more is hung than they can hold”. Critique has also been expressed by Janet Watson (2011: 869), Enam Al-Wer & Bruno Herin (2011: 67, fn. 11), Adam Benkato (2019) and Alexander Magidow (2021: 2 and 21f).

One point of contention is the fact that the term “Bedouin” is too imprecise and often no longer reflects social realities, as many Bedouin speakers now live in large cities. No doubt, there are terminological challenges which should not be ignored. We have to consider that terms such as *ṣarab* and *badu* have always had diverse connotations (Leder 2015; Sawayan 2005). Although there are certainly many speakers who still regard themselves and their speech as of Bedouin origin, there are also many others who would dispute the labelling of their speech as “Bedouin” by dialectologists.

In search for a better understanding of the Bedouin-sedentary dichotomy, several scholars have made attempts to specify the linguistic features characteristic of Bedouin dialects beyond the voiced pronunciation of *\*q*. Among the most important studies are Caubet 2000; Rosenhouse 1984; 2006; Behnstedt & Woidich 2005: 42-43; Behnstedt 2008; Vicente 2008: 50-53; De Jong 2011: 316-323; and al-Sharkawi 2014. Rosenhouse 2006 made rudimentary efforts to establish a pan-Bedouin vocabulary. All these efforts have been criticized, arguing that most of the features listed apply only to certain subgroups of Bedouin-type dialects and/or are also found in dialects regarded as sedentary (cf. e.g. Stewart 2017: 186-191 and Watson 2011: 870).

General statements often emphasize the archaic character of the Bedouin dialects (e.g. Rosenhouse 2006: 259). Magidow harshly criticizes this stereotype and maintains that “Bedouin dialects do not appear to be more or less innovative in general than sedentary dialects” (2021: 4). Whether this holds true when a large number of features are compared remains to be seen. In any case, labels like traditional, archaic and conservative need to be used with caution due, in particular, to the following issues:

- (1) What is the yardstick for maintaining a dialect’s conservativeness? Considering Classical Arabic alone has its pitfalls, as there are numerous traits in the dialects which are more archaic than the standardized Classical Language (see Pat-El 2017).

- (2) Even more problematic is the fact that shared retentions are generally less suitable for classifications than shared innovations.

The approach employed by al-Sharkawi offers an example of the latter. For him, the main feature of distinction is the existence or loss of gender in the plural of verbs and pronouns: “There is a group of modern dialects of Arabic that have a morphological gender distinction [...] on 2nd and 3rd persons plural, on verbs of all tenses and on other morphological word classes. [...] These will be called Bedouin dialects. Other dialects do not have a morphological distinction between plural feminine and plural masculine nouns, verbs and/or any other word classes. [...] These dialects are called here urban dialects” (al-Sharkawi 2014: 88).

But because all the ancestors of today’s dialects had gender distinction in plural, that is not a solid criterion for classification. *Table 1* reveals that the loss of gender in the plural is not uncommon in Bedouin dialects and – what is even more striking – is not entirely absent from typical sedentary dialects.

No gender distinction	Gender distinction
Āl Murra Bedouins in Arabia	Most Yemeni dialects
W-Algerian Bedouin dialects	All Omani dialects
Moroccan Bedouin dialects	Rural dialects of W-Syria
Ḥassāniyya Bedouin dialect <sup>3</sup>	Rural Palestinian dialects

*Table 1:* Gender distinction in the plural of verbs and pronouns.

The same problem arises with another frequently cited feature, the retention of the interdental consonants (*Table 2*).

Interdentals lost	Interdentals preserved
Some Algerian Bedouin dialects	Mardin group in Anatolia
Some Moroccan Bedouin dialects	Rural Palestinian dialects
	Tunisian sedentary dialects <sup>4</sup>

*Table 2:* Loss and retention of the interdental fricatives \*ḏ, \*ṭ and \*ḑ.

Another frequently listed feature is the apophonic passive of the type *šīl* “it was carried” vs *šāl* “he carried” (as in the Najdi dialects). But this, too, fails to fulfil the criteria for a typical Bedouin feature – first, because it is also preserved in a handful of sedentary dialects, particularly in Oman, and second, because it is also absent from a majority of the Bedouin-type dialects outside of Arabia.

<sup>3</sup> Gender distinction is retained only in personal pronouns.

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of Mahdiyya.



At this point, one might wonder if we were looking for the wrong features or if there are no features beyond the famous *gāf* which underpin the Bedouin-sedentary split. It is a fact that hitherto classifications in Arabic dialectology have been primarily based on phonological features, whereas syntax and lexicon have rarely been included. Hence, there may be additional features out there that could answer our question.

A potential syntactical candidate worth looking at is *agreement*, as it exhibits immense variation in spoken Arabic. However, according to Bettega & D’Anna in their recently published book, “It should be clear, by now, that the [“Bedouin vs Sedentary” distinction] is not very revealing when it comes to agreement-related phenomena.” (Bettega & D’Anna 2023: 374) In his thesis on the grammaticalization of future markers, genitive exponents and other phenomena, Leddy-Cecere (2018: 216) claims that the “fundamental distinction between Bedouin and sedentary varieties [...] does not seem to be reflected by any discernible signal in the CIG [Contact-Induced Grammaticalization] data”.

Hence, one may come to the conclusion that it is a futile effort to look for further features. This is very likely true when we expect to find single features that are present in *all* Bedouin dialects and absent from *all* sedentary varieties. The following three categories of features seem to be more promising in the search for a more robust linguistic foundation for the Bedouin-sedentary dichotomy:

- (1) Features which are innovations or reflexes of ancient features that are not attested in Classical Arabic and which are either “Bedouin-only” or “sedentary-only”.
- (2) Bundles of features that connect certain dialects, both Bedouin and sedentary.
- (3) Features that virtually no one has yet looked at systematically because they are generally understudied in Arabic dialects.

As for (1), there seem to be multiple Bedouin-only features, perhaps with slight exceptions, that can be explained by intra-dialectal contact, including:

- The re-syllabification of \*CaCaCv patterns: Šāwi: \**zalama* > *zlime* “man”, \**raqaba* > *rguḅa* “neck”.
- The famous *gahawa* syndrome: Šāwi: \**yaḥkī* > *yḥači* “he talks”, \**ḡaḥmar* > \**ḡamar* > *ḥamar* “red”.
- Stress on the definite article, e.g. Negev: *ál-ganam* “the sheep”, *án-nada* “the dew” (Shawarbah 2012: 103).
- 3SG.M pronoun suffix *-a(h)*, e.g. Khuzestan: *bēt-a* “his house” (Leitner 2022: 79).
- The plural pattern C<sub>1</sub>C<sub>2</sub>vC<sub>3</sub>C<sub>3</sub>: Šāwi: *kuḅḅa* PL *kḅaḅḅ* “kibbe”; Upper Egypt: *šaṇṭa* PL *šnaṭṭ* “bag”; S-Tunisia: *nugba* PL *ngubb* “pit”.

- Adnominal linker *tanwīn*, e.g. Šāwi: *ghawt-in murra* “bitter coffee”.<sup>5</sup> Such features can be contrasted with “sedentary-only” features, including:
- The clitic doubling in object marking and periphrastic genitives, e.g. Damascus (Grotzfeld 1964: 127).

<i>dall</i>	<i>yʕazzəb-ha</i>	<i>la-mart-o</i>
DURATIVE	harass.IPFV.3SG.M-3SG.F	to-wife-3SG.M

“He kept on harassing his wife.”

At least for N-Africa, it is stated that the “commonly used division of Maghrebi dialects into “Hilalian” varieties, brought by Bedouins starting from 11th, and “pre-Hilalian” varieties, mainly in and around urban areas [...], turns out to be rather useful in understanding the distribution of clitic doubling in this region.” (Souag 2017: 56). To the best of my knowledge, there is no Bedouin-type dialect in the east that exhibits this feature.<sup>6</sup>

- The syntagm noun-article-adjective, which is an ancient trace in Arabic (Stokes 2020) that has generally survived only in few lexical items in the Bedouin dialects,<sup>7</sup> therefore indirectly proving that they are not necessarily more conservative than the sedentary dialects. Here is an example from Cilician Arabic (Procházka 2022: 545):

<i>bayt</i>	<i>il-ʕatīq</i>
house	DEF-old

“the old house”

As for (2), the clustering of linguistic features for the detection of historical connections is more promising than the pure enumeration of non-related single features. This also applies to the common geographical classification of Arabic dialects (for the example of Syria, cf. (Berlinches Ramos 2019)). The following list of bundles of features is preliminary and needs to be re-examined in detail, but can hopefully shed some light on how “feature clusters” can contribute to a better understanding of dialect groups.

- Those Bedouin-type dialects of the Gulf, S-Iraq (Basra) and Khuzestan which demonstrate the shift \*ǧ > y all have *-a* as the 3SG.M pronoun suffix.

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<sup>5</sup> This feature is not Bedouin-only, as it is also attested in Central Asia, Omani *haḍari* dialects, and in Andalusī Arabic. It is mentioned here because the overwhelming majority of dialects exhibiting *tanwīn* are of the Bedouin-type today.

<sup>6</sup> It is revealing that when my colleague Ana Iriarte Díez asked “Bedouin” speakers in Beirut’s Karantīna district during her fieldwork in 2022 how they express *mbēriḥ ʕaft-o la-mḥammad* in their dialects, they kept on answering *mbāriḥ ʕuft mḥimmad* “Yesterday I saw Muhammad.”

<sup>7</sup> There are some exceptions, particularly in the Harran-Urfa region in Turkey (Procházka 2022: 545) and in the dialect of the Yāl Saḥad in Oman (Al Sheyadi 2021: 205-6). In the first case, it could be an innovation, and in the second, the influence of the nearby sedentary varieties.

- Dialects exhibiting the unusual shift  $*\dot{g} > q$ , however, have a 3SG.M pronoun suffix *-u*. Apart from some Algerian dialects, such a combination is only found in the Šāwi dialects of N-Syria and the Ḥassāniyya dialect of Mauritania – i.e. two regions which could hardly be any farther apart geographically.
- The latter two dialects also share the rare grammaticalization of *gām* as an imperfective marker (Hanitsch 2019: 272) and the use of the reflexes of *\*qabaḍ* in the sense of “then” (Taine-Cheikh 2018: 304). Such correlations may help establish relationships between specific Bedouin-type dialects.
- Lexical similarities between geographically distant dialects like those of the Syrian Desert, Tunisia and Mauritania may also help us to understand original relationships. In both the Syrian Šāwi dialects and in Ḥassāniyya *ǧidaḥ* respectively *ǧḍaḥ* is used to express “to vomit”, whilst *ǧalwa/ǧilwa* “hill” is shared by the Šāwi and the Tunisian Maḥāzīg dialects.

As for (3), one could mention prosody, which is often identified by Arabic speakers themselves as a salient trait, but which has largely been neglected in Arabic linguistics thus far, particularly with regard to comparative studies.

## Conclusion

Most of the features briefly discussed in the preceding paragraphs suggest that the linguistic basis of the Bedouin-sedentary split is largely built on sand. There are more shifting dunes and pits of quicksand than solid rocks which provide us with a foundation to underpin the traditional classification of Arabic dialects.

However, even dunes can be landmarks and I still firmly believe that additional research should be done before we completely abandon the idea that there is something like Bedouin-type Arabic. Of course, we need to question the notions of archaism and conservativeness commonly associated with Bedouin Arabic. There can be no doubt that the Bedouin-sedentary split should be applied with caution, and both the linguistic and the sociological details are very complex. However, if we use “Bedouin” as a linguistic category rather than a past or present lifestyle, it may turn out that it is “to some degree still valid and useful” (Holes 2018: 21) and may contribute to a better understanding of the history of Arabic.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> We can also look for new terms like “second layer dialects” to replace “Bedouin/Hilālī dialects of the Maghreb” (Benkato 2019: 9, fn.17). This is fine, but to my mind such re-naming is a terminological issue which would not change anything in the categorization of the dialects in question.

The Bedouin-sedentary distinction may prove useful as a heuristic tool for explaining certain peculiarities of Arabic dialects – most notably, the surprising typological stability when compared to other living Semitic languages. One may ask what role the nomads played in this slow development, as they fostered convergence through their mobility, migrations and inter-tribal contacts. According to Watson 2011: 866, the fact “that Arabic dialects emerged and continue to emerge from a heterogeneous dialect landscape can be seen by comparing lexical, syntactic and morphological features across the Arab world, features which reflect temporary and permanent population movements.” With the exception of the first migration wave during and after the large conquests, these movements were mainly performed by Bedouins who thus carried their dialects to regions where rather different dialects were spoken. According to Diem (1978: 136), the Bedouin-led second wave of Arabicization in the 10th and 11th centuries fostered a great process of levelling. It is well known that the mobility of large groups of people plays an eminent role in contact-induced language change. As for Europe, it is assumed that most features of the so-called Standard Average European emerged during the large-scale migrations (4th–9th centuries), which led to the transformation from Late Antiquity to Early Middle Ages (Haspelmath 2001: 1507).

In the Arabic-speaking world, the mobility of speakers was routine until the 20th century. And the dialects of the Bedouins, who are the proponents of this mobility, are an important key for understanding linguistic levelling and the spread of linguistic features in pre-modern times. We may recall here the hypothesis that the *niktib-niktbu* pattern was largely spread by Bedouins from Egypt to the whole of North Africa (Behnstedt 2016: 28-30).

There are currently three larger projects based at the University of Vienna,<sup>9</sup> where we also attempt to widen the search for salient features of Bedouin-type Arabic in syntax and lexicon, using methods from historical linguistics, sociolinguistics and language typology. All this will hopefully contribute to a leap forward in our understanding of “What is Bedouin-type Arabic?” Based on initial results of the ongoing research, we suspect that the answer will be rather complex and that some hitherto common claims about Bedouin Arabic will require revision.

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<sup>9</sup> In addition to the ERC-funded WIBARAB project mentioned in fn. 1, the two FWF-financed projects The Shawi-type Arabic dialects spoken in South-Eastern Anatolia and the Middle-Euphrates region and Tunisia’s Linguistic terra incognita: An Investigation into the Arabic Varieties of North-western and Central Tunisia (PI Veronika Ritt-Benmimoun).

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