Lingua franca, lingue franche

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Indice

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Too many lingua francas? The strange case of Arabic

Riassunto

L'articolo affronta in primis la questione di una possibile definizione di "lingua franca" per poi sviluppare il tema del possibile ruolo dell'arabo (nelle sue diverse forme) come lingua franca dal punto di vista sociolinguistico. La sezione 2. tratta brevemente della diglossia così tipica (ma niente affatto esclusiva) del mondo arabo alla luce di una possibile analisi dell'arabo in quanto lingua franca. L'impareggiabile ruolo storico svolto dall'arabo nell'arricchimento lessicale delle lingue africane e la sua importanza anche contemporanea in alcuni contesti dell'Africa Orientale costituiscono l'oggetto della sezione 3.

Nella sezione 4. vengono infine presentati la nascita e lo sviluppo dei pidgin e creoli a base araba in Africa Orientale come ulteriore tassello di una possibile analisi dell'arabo in quanto una delle grandi lingue franche storiche.

Abstract

The article tackles in its Section 1 the question of a viable definition of "lingua franca" as a linguistic entity, and in the ensuing sections discusses Arabic in its manifold forms and insofar as used as a (sociolinguistic) lingua franca or an auxiliary communication tool. It will be seen in 2. that the very diglossia so typical (although far from exclusive) of the Arab world is conducive to an analysis of Arabic as a lingua franca. The historical, momentous role of Arabic as a lexical donor in Africa and, although more limited in scope, continuing and renewed role in the modern vocabulary of certain East African languages is discussed in Section 3., while the rise and development of Arabic-based pidgins and creoles is further presented in 4. and adds to a characterization of Arabic as an at least partial lingua franca.

1. *Looking for a definition*

As linguists, we are hardly put when asked to offer clear, watertight (and foolproof) definitions of many a concept in our discipline. Lingua franca is certainly among them: there is no "lingua-franca-ness" to invoke and against which to measure putative cases. Still, lingua francas "exist", and "the appeal of the so-called linguas francas is especially evident in human beings showing high propensity to move, i.e., motility" (Gobbo – Marácz 2021, 75). Far from the strict meaning and reference of its eponym, the historical and capitalized *Lingua Franca* of the Mediterranean Early Modern Age, a lingua franca (from now on not capitalized) seems, if anything, to be only loosely amenable to two very different definitions: one is purely sociolinguistic in nature, and runs sonmething like: "any medium (but most frequently a language) used as an auxiliary communication tool." It is in this sense that "lingua franca" is applied to perfectly "natural" languages that come to enjoy a measure of international use, either in restricted domains or for general communication. On the other hand, why not to include planned or constructed languages with an auxiliary goal (and therefore with the exclusion of artistic languages; Gobbo 2017)?

It is obvious that "a language used as an auxiliary communication tool" can be written, oral, or both; it can be ephemeral or last for centuries; it can be hegemonic in its domain or share its status with other languages. It can even be a dead language with no first-language speakers. What is definitely not required are specific liguistic features, a definite typology or certain phonemes and not others: everything goes. With lingua francas we are out of linguistics *stricto sensu*.

According to another view, a lingua franca does have certain defining linguistic features, such as a good amount of grammatical simplification (in itself quite an ill-defined concept), great variation in structure, and vastly, diverse origins in lexicon (as if perfectly "normal" languages would be any different here!). This array of linguistic features is then coupled to the sociolinguistic description mentioned above. Unplanned ad-hoc solutions to communication problems take central stage now, with solutions such as pidgins, pidgincreoles (Bakker 2008) and also the historical Mediterranean Lingua Franca. But now, what exactly is the difference between a lingua franca and a pidgin? (often characterized as a "simplified, non-native language" by definition).

In this article I will take a strictly sociolinguistic quasi-definition of lingua franca and will explore the concept of lingua franca with application to Arabic: it will be a difficult – but hopefully not useless – exercise, especially considering that Arabic is definitely quite a special type of "linguistic beast".

2. *The four "magical circles" of Arabic*

To add a further layer of complexity to an already messy picture, to discuss the status of Arabic as a lingua franca requires a definition of what "Arabic" actually means. This is far from a trivial question and it has been asked and tentatively answered many times. "What is Arabic" is the title of a whole chapter (Retsö 2013) in the *Oxford Handbook of Arabic Linguistics* (Owens 2013) and it is far from an easy question.

We can pictorially represent the "Arabic complex" (Owens 2001) as in Figure 1.

the inner circle:
Arabic dialects in the
Arab world

"peripheral Arabic" out
of the Arab world (a
minority language)

"Araboids"
(Maltese, Arabic-based P/C.s,
immigrant Arabic varieties)

Arabic as a second language
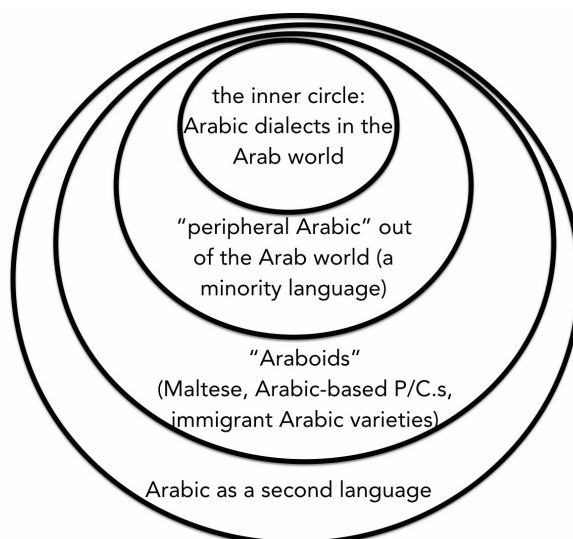
Fig. 1. The four "magical circles" of Arabic

2.1. *The circle of diglossia*

The innermost circle in Fig. 1 is where anybody would put Arabic: the Arab world, a world that Suleiman (2013) has called "semiliquid". It is here that the first complication arises, and its name is diglossia. Since its introduction in the late 1950s by Charles Ferguson (Ferguson 1959) diglossia – a term originally koined by the French Arabist William Marçais (1872-1956) – has known an immense fortune – and this notwithstanding it brushes aside many, even fundamental facets of an extremely complex sociolinguistic picture, where intermediate forms of Arabic thrive and often are the real winners (cf. Al-Wer 2013 for a critique of the whole "diglossia-based" approach).

The consequences of diglossia are momentous and not only socially in the Arab world, but also conceptually in any definition of the Arabic language. The use of quotes in the following passage is crucial.

Not only does any "Arab" speak "Arabic" in the form of any number of Arabic "dialects": he or she also uses, in specifically, socially mandated contexts, "another Arabic," natively called *fuṣḥā*[1] "pure" and which scholars prefer to label Modern Standard Arabic and tag MSA. Nobody speaks it as his/her first or native language, but everybody learns and is exposed to it, to different degrees, and speaks it to any degree of fluency. From this perspective, Arabic is essentially an "ill-defined" language (Kaye 1972). This high variety only the speaker considers "Arabic" and to it only s/he generally pledges allegiance as a proper "language."[2]

Now, if

1. any native speaker of Arabic is a native speaker of an Arabic dialect, and if
2. this "dialect" is different enough at all levels of analysis to often be, linguistically speaking, a selfstanding language, then we seem forced to conclude that
3. Standard Arabic has, by definition, no native speaker: it would be a dead language.

The origins of diglossia are since long hotly debated, but it is certainly a very old phenomenon, dating back at least to the early history of Islam and the spread of Arabic out of the Peninsula in the seventh century AD, if not preceding it.[3]

If not directly caused by it, diglossia is certainly linked to the spread of Arabic as, again, the lingua franca of the Islamic empire or of a good part of it, where many minorities (religious, ethnic, *and* linguistic) were successfully and very often peacefully accommodated (Tosco 2015).

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[1] Arabic will be transcribed using the common transliteration system, where an underlying dot stands for a so-called "emphatic" (phonetically pharyngealized) consonant.

[2] Morocco is maybe the only Arab country where the local spoken dialect (called *dārija*, lit. "current") is by many recognized as the real spoken "language." It is also the country whose dialect is generally considered the most divergent.

[3] Any good introduction to Arabic and its history will provide ample discussion and references on this point. Excellent examples are Owens (2006) and Versteegh (1997) and, more succinctly, Owens (2013). Vertseegh proposed also a radical (but generally refused) hypothesis (Versteegh 1984) which sees the origin of the modern situation in the early pidginization of the classical language in the first phases of contact within the incipient Islamic empire.

2.2. *Out of the Arab world, out of diglossia*

No diglossia operates instead in the case of the Arabic minorities out of the Arab world. The most prominent among these traditional old Arab minorities are found in Turkey, Cyprus, Nigeria, Iran, and Central Asia, as shown in Figure 2.

Map 1. Arabic ethnic minorities
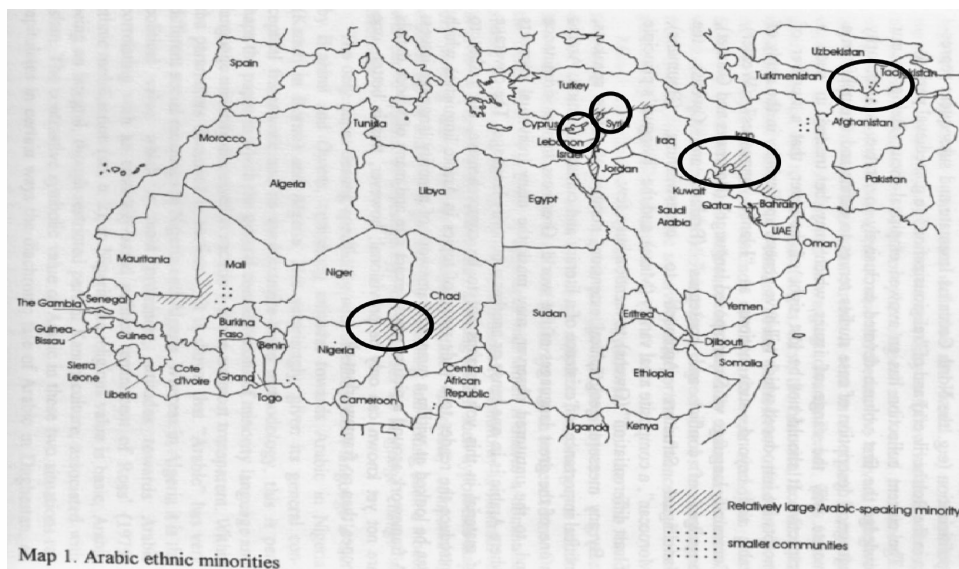
Fig. 2. The spread of Arabic, 1: where? (from Owens 2000, modified)

In all these countries bi- or multilingualism is of course widespread: it involves Turkish and Kurdish in Turkey, Greek in Cyprus among the dwindling Maronite community, Persian in Iran, Dari in Afghanistan, Tajik in Tajikistan and Uzbek in Uzbekistan. In Nigeria, Hausa and Kanuri are the local big players in the Northeast where Arabic is spoken.[4]

To these one can add here the substantial Arab communities in Europe, South America, Africa and actually all over the globe. The demographic role of Arabic around the globe is shown in Figure 3. (while an even more interesting map would range the role of Arabic across time):

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[4] The articles in Owens (2000) are the most authoritative source here.
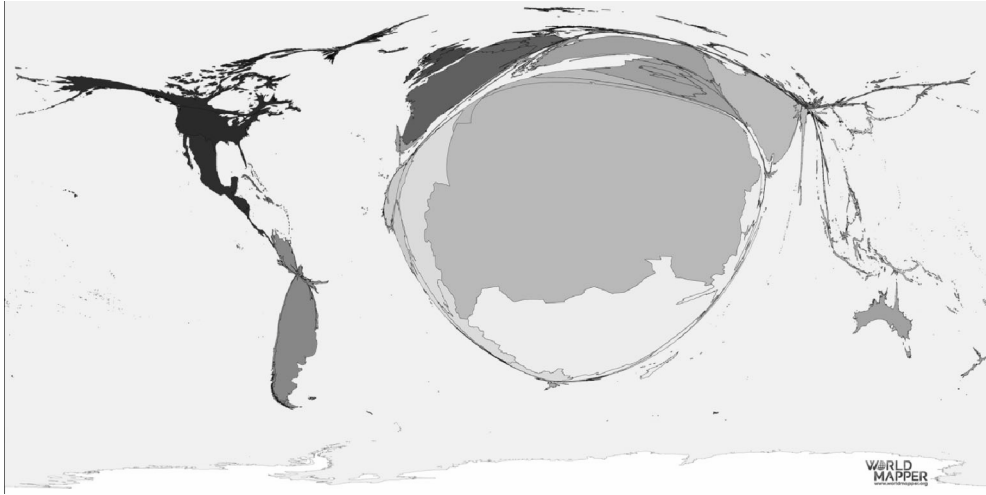
Fig. 3. The spread of Arabic, 2: how much?
(https://worldmapper.org/maps/language-arabicspread-
2005/#&gid=1&pid=1)

In all the contexts where Cassical or Standard, written Arabic is not the official language the speakers themselves are in the situation of a (often endangered) minority. "High" Arabic may still be and generally is highly respected as the language of Islam, but we enter here the same situation which applies to any Muslim (not necessarily Arabic-speaking) community, where Arabic is a second language, the language of religion but often also, especially in the past, the language of learning and science.

2.3. *Out of "true" Arabic*

With the third circle we leave, strictly speaking, the Arab world: here it is where Arabic became "something else" – an Araboid, as Owens (2001) called it. It is the case of Maltese, classificatorily an Arabic-derived European language whose uniqueness stems from a thousand-year-long Romance (and later English) lexical influence grafted upon a robust Arabic morphology.

And then, of course, Arabic is also much else: one of the great world languages. We tackle the latter – and the role of Arabic as a source of loans – in Section 3. and move to Arabic-based pidgins and creoles in Section 4.

3. Arabic as a past lingua franca… and a convenient resource today

Can we describe Arabic as a lingua franca on the basis of its massive lexifying role in so many languages of the world?

Borrowing is the most evident marker of language contact, and the latitude and longitude of loans from a language, i.e., its ability to impregnate another language across a vast array of semantic fields, registers and styles is a good indication of that language being a lingua franca of some sort, or having been so in the past.

The momentous influence of Arabic in the lexicon of a good deal of languages of East and West Africa (not to mention of course those of other continents: Asia and Europe) is of course universally known. The widespread role of the Arabic script in Africa – and well beyond such prime examples as Hausa and Swahili – has found at last an excellent overview in Mumin – Versteegh (2014), and the manifold adaptations of the Arabic script in Africa, still nelected in the short overview on the fortunes of the script in Kaye (1995), have had at last the coverage they deserve.

Being the language of one of the great religions of the world makes Arabic ipso facto one of the great carriers of knowledge and science around the world, but, as aptly remarked by Versteegh (2015), the days of the Arab "empire of knowledge" (to use Versteegh's title) seem over.

Manfredi – Tosco (2018b) explore the conditions, modalities and consequences of contact with Arabic in different areas of language and grammar, while Lucas – Manfredi (2020) discuss change in Arabic as a result of contact. Of all linguistic domains, the role of a language as a lexical donor is of course the first indicator of its role as a lingua franca, at least historically. Here, Baldi's (2020) recent dictionary of Arabic loans in Central and East Africa is an imposing testimony of at least a past influence. But if this certainly applies to the past, what about the situation after the European imperialism and the imposition of new, European linguas francas – which at least de jure enjoy the support of all the modern bureaucratic apparatus of nation-states, from compulsory public education to state-wide communication?

It is interesting to note that big, official and "Ausbau-ized" (Tosco 2008a) languages such as Hausa and Swahili, resort to internal formations or to English (or any other Europena language) rather than to Arabic for concepts of modern life and technology. We find an example of the former in Hausa *jirgin sama* "airplane" (lit. "canoe-of sky" – whose second element is Arabic *samā'* "sky"), and of the latter in Swahili *eropleni* "airplane" (but also *ndege*, lit. "bird"). Nor is a long colonial history a

prerequisite for heavy lexical interference – as shown inter alia by Amharic *awroplan* or *ayroplan* "airplane", an obvious loan from a European source.

It is thus all the more surprising to find not only Somali *diyaarad* but also an Oromo *xayaara* /**t'ajaara**/[5] for "airplane"and both from Arabic *ṭayyāra.* How can we explain this fact?

In Tosco (2008a) I referred to the choice of an external donor as a powerful tool in the lexical expansion of minority languages. Many examples in the Italian context are provided by Piedmontese and its renewed and conscious use of French as a source of lexical modernization within an overt process of de-Italianization (Tosco 2011, 2012).

Savà – Tosco (2008) pointed instead to the role of Arabic in Ethiopian languages not previously (or only partially) affected by the influence of Arabic. Pressed by the necessity to enrich their lexicon and phraseology but resenting and refusing the pressure of Amharic, the former Imperial and only official language of the country, local languages may find a way out not only in internal creation through the well-known methods of calquing and specialization of meaning, but also in the adoption of foreign words: being the distance from the local dominating medium the only issue at hand, a foreign but historically close language may come in handy.

In Tosco (2008a) I discussed the case of "politics", where the Western word entered Amharic under the form *polätika* (originally from Italian *politica*).[6] While purely indigenous solutions were proposed for Oromo in Tamene (2000), in the end, the Arabic loan *siyāsa* was adopted under the form *siyaasaa.*

In the case instead of "book", both an Amharic-derived and an Arabic-derived loan were in competition among different sections of the Oromo people: Eastern, mainly Muslim Oromo borrowed Arabic *kitāb* as *kitaaba*, while the highland Oromos of central Ethiopia, mainly Orthodox Christians, adopted Amharic *mäṣhaf* as *macaafa* /**matʃ'aafa**/. The final choice of using *kitaaba* in official Oromo stems of course from ideological considerations.

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[5] In Oromo and other non-Semitic languages of Ethiopia <x> is used for the ejective alveolar stop /**t'**/. Furthermore, while <ch> marks a plain palato-alveolar affricate /**tʃ**/, plain <c> is used for its ejective counterpart /**tʃ'**/.

[6] Cf. Tosco (2008b, forthcoming) for an analysis of the Italian loans in the languages of East Africa.

While ideology looms large in any decision in language policy, it becomes obvious that the Oromo airplane (*xayaara*) is the direct result of a conscious choice; Somali *diyaarad* is instead an easy solution (a Western loan or a native formation being of course also possible), and goes along thousands of similar words in all the registers of the modern language, from *matxaf* "museum" (Arabic *matḥaf*) to *jaamacad* "university" (Arabic *jāmiʿa*), to name just two among thousands. The Somali choice was prompted by the absence of another viable local source and also by the uninterrupted role of Arabic as a language of culture, with Italian and English providing two additional lexical layers (and the latter today dominating).

In this sense, Oromo *xayaara* 'airplane' from Arabic *ṭayyāra* is much more interesting than Somali *diyaarad*, because in Oromo it is a direct refusal of Amharic *awroplan* or *ayroplan* mentioned above: both in the case of "politics" as for "airplane", it is important to stress how the original source of the word is immaterial and only the direct donor language has any bearing for ideological considerations – and therefore in language policy.

Outside Ethiopia, the European loans were grafted directly from their source (mainly English or French) without the mediation of another African language acting as the roof language for the whole country: in times of language policy (one could say, of language liberation) there was nothing to react against and to refute, and the Western word could be unashamedly embraced.

4. Arabic as an existing but refused lingua franca

Lingua francas are not neutral: they are linked to specific historical circumstances, and these are bound to change. The preception of lingua francas is likewise bound to ups and downs. Lingua francas can be welcome only to be later refuted; they can be admired and enthusiastically aped, and then see their influence scorned and bitterly resented; they can at the same time be desperately loved and utterly hated. Arabic is no exception.
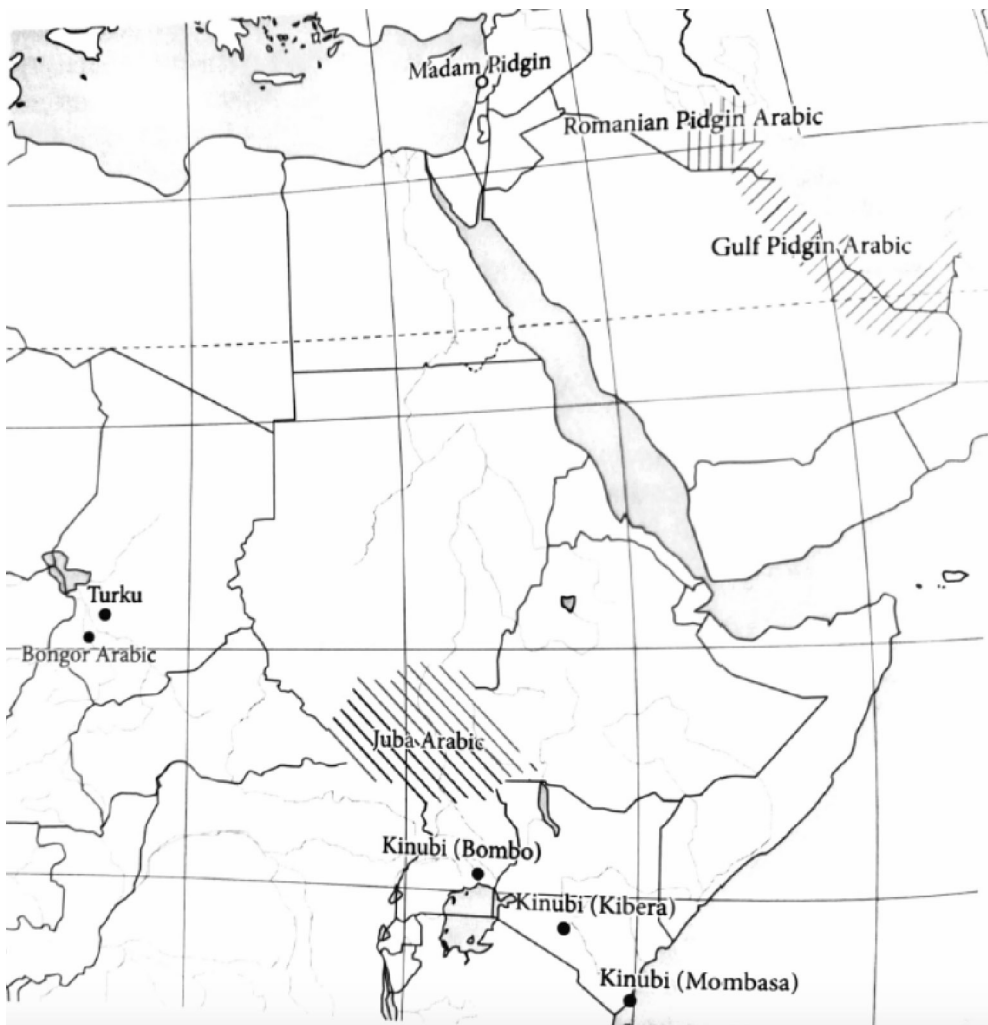
Fig. 4. Arabic-based pidgins and creoles (Tosco – Manfredi 2013, 496)

Nowadays Arabic-based pidgins and creoles are found both in East Africa and the Near and Middle East. Tosco – Manfredi (2013) provide an overview, while the articles in Manfredi – Tosco (2014) explore a variety of linguistic and sociolinguistic points in different varieties.

A pidginized form of Arabic generally going scholarly under the label of Gulf Pidgin Arabic is nowadays the lingua franca among immigrant, especially South and East Asian, communities in the Middle East (mostly in the Gulf area) and between them and Arabs. Like any bona fide pidgin, we would hardly put to call it Arabic in any meaningful sense of the word – although it *is* Arabic from the speakers' perspective.

The most prominent Arabic-based pidgin is certainly Juba Arabic, so-called from the name of the capital of South Sudan. The only Arabic-based creole is Nubi (also Ki-Nubi) of Uganda and Kenya, itself closely related to Juba Arabic. Their origins hark back to the 19th century and the opening of what is now called South Sudan to Arab and Western exploitation. The articles in Owens (1994) still provide a good historical introduction. The history has been told countless times, and sees the rise and spread of a pidgin out of various forms of broken Arabic used in the military camps of what was to become the South Sudan. Faced with a tremendous number of separate ethnic languages (*Ethnologue* reports over 60 of them) belonging to different groups, and the absence of any widespread lingua franca, a simplified form of Sudanese Arabic (the native Arabic dialect spoken in the North of the country) quickly spread as a common idiom of the troops that were being recruited among the local population.

A turning point was Muhammad Ahmad's (1844-1885) successful uprising against Egyptian and British rule in the Sudan. After he proclaimed himself and was largely accepted as the Mahdi (the Messianic figure set to rid the world of evil), he could launch a holy war and even defeat Egyptian and British troops.

In the South, cut off from their supply routes along the Nile, a small group of local troops managed their way to British East Africa in 1888. The pidgin was acquired by their descendants as a creole and became was is today known as Nubi. In the South Sudan itself the pidgin continued to this day to be widely spoken and in more recent times it certainly partially creolized, especially in Juba town (becoming what Bakker 2008 calls a "pidgincreole" – a pidgin for most but also the first language of an increasingly vast number of speakers).

From a strictly linguistic point of view, it is evident that Juba Arabic (and Nubi, but the same is true of the Gulf Pidgin Arabic mentioned above and of other varieties) is a language of its own, completely unintelligible to Arabic-speakers and radically different from those (to-date still very poorly investigated) forms of "simplified Arabic" used in other areas of the Sudan (and of South Sudan, where they go under the name of *arắbi basît* "simple Arabic"). As usual in pidgins and creoles, the lexicon overwhelmingly betrays its lexifier. At the same time, while substratal influence (at all levels) is very difficult to trace and essentially missing, whole chunks of Arabic phonology, morphology and syntax have been lost (which makes especially interesting those few remains of Arabic morphology, thoroughly investigated in Owens 2014). Pharyngealization, pharyngeals, uvulars and vowel length are absent (while word stress, under the form of pitch, is distinctive); equally absent are root-and-pattern morphology, verbal inflection and verbal and nominal derivation, as well as gender as a grammatical category; and so on and so forth.

Nowadays, the constitution of South Sudan (which became independent in 2011) grants English (scarcely known at all) the status of only official language. Arabic, once co-official alongside English in the Southern part of Sudan, has lost any official recognition (although it is certainly much better known than English). The constitution further recognizes all the indigenous languages as "national languages".

Still, Juba Arabic is the only language which can command a wide intelligibility over at least a good part of the country. But it is certanly not an indigenous language, nor a foreign, but still recognized, language. Actually… it is not even a language, according to many: it is a broken, simplified form of Arabic!

Would it be useful for a country like South Sudan to recognize Juba Arabic and its role as an interethnic medium of communication, maybe the only feasible one now and in the next future?

Manfredi – Tosco (2018a) try to answer with the help of anonymous questionnaires and interviews with public officers: Juba Arabic appears to be greatly appreciated by the speakers and seems to be nowadays largely devoid of any negative connotation as "Arabic", the language of the enemy during the decades-long civil war. Not so among politicians. As always, ideology stands in the way of sensible and right language policies (or maybe of sensible and right policies, period).

Juba Arabic is not endangered at all: if anything, local minor ethnic languages are. During our fieldwork in Juba (Summer 2013), several of our young assistants easily admitted that their knowledge of the "tribal language" was at most imperfect, and mainly used when visiting relatives in the countryside. At the same time, Juba Arabic is already the *de facto* language of the country and is more and more used in the media: again and again, politics lags behind reality.

5. *Idle considerations on the future of lingua francas*

Roughly corresponding to the four "magical circles" of Figure 1., we find therefore four different varieties of Arabic that, each in its domain, act or ever acted as lingua francas:
   • Classical Arabic, as the language of Islamic faith and knowledge;
   • Modern Standard Arabic, the lingua franca of the Arab world and beyond;
   • a Regional or National Arabic, established as a lingua franca within the borders of a national community;
   • a simplified form of Arabic or an Arabic-based pidgin among non-Arab populations in contact with Arabic.

Ostler (2010), discussing the future of English as the contemporary most widespread lingua franca, has claimed that progress in automatic translation paves the way to its very demise and the death of lingua francas in general: English will be "the last one".

Personally, I deem the analysis suggestive but not very plausible. Quite to the contrary, I think that local or national lingua francas are bound to develop and flourish. These "mini lingua francas" will not always be what governments want and prescribe but they will be there nonetheless. Juba Arabic in South Sudan (cf. Section 4.) is in my opinion bound to be one.

Supranational, or regional lingua francas will equally remain a viable form of communication, and it is here that Arabic, as other big players among the world languages, will keep having a role.

The world, international scene is another playfield – and one where I am happy to leave others play.

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