Attitude and vernacular language maintenance.

An account from the oasis of Siwa (Egypt)

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SIWA

- Situated in the Egyptian Western desert, 65 km from the Libyan border and 600 km from the Nile valley
- Population: 25,000 people
- Ethnicity: Berber - Arab (minority)
- Vernacular language: Sīwī - Arabic (minority)
Factors leading to the diffusion of the Arabic language (second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} c.)

- Diffusion of schooling;
- Young Siwan men’s migration to Arabic speaking countries for work;
- Upper Egyptian workers’ employment in Siwan gardens;
- Opening of the asphalt road connecting Siwa to Marsā Maṭrūḥ;
- Introduction of television, with Arabic language broadcasts;
- Increasing tourism from Arabic and non-Arabic speaking countries, and from Egypt itself.
Current sociolinguistic situation

Varieties of Siwans’ repertoire:

- **ṣīwī**: mother tongue of the majority of the oasis’ population;
- **fushā**, classical and standard Arabic: language of religion and the only written one;
- **ʿāmmiyya**, colloquial Arabic: used to communicate with non-ṣīwī speakers. The term indicates here the urban varieties of the Nile Delta;
- **badawī**, colloquial Arabic: mother tongue of the only Siwan tribe of Arab ethnicity, spoken by sīwī speakers to communicate with them and with people from Marsā Maṭrūḥ and Libya.
Language Attitudes and Ideologies:

- Social psychology: an attitude is the disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a given object.

- Attitudes have a cognitive component, an affective component and a behavioural one.

- Anthropology: the interest is shifted from individual’s to group’s level.

- Language ideologies are sets of group’s beliefs about language and language use.
Fieldwork in Siwa: Winter 2011

1. Written questionnaires:
   - Language: Standard Arabic
   - 90 secondary school students (16-21 years old)
   - 81/90 born in Siwa
   - 71/90 born from Siwan-born parents
Fieldwork in Siwa: Winter 2011

2. Qualitative interviews

– Language: ʿāmmiyya and English

– 15/16 Siwans (20-90 years old)

– 9/16 men

– 7/16 women
In Siwa, in your opinion, people speak:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informants from a totally-Siwan family</th>
<th>Informants from a non-totally-Siwan family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>sīwī</em></td>
<td><em>sīwī</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʿāmmiyya</td>
<td>ʿāmmiyya</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In sum, they believe that Siwans speak **always *sīwī*** and **sometimes ʿāmmiyya**.
### Informants from a totally-Siwan family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sīwī</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ʿāmmiyya</td>
<td>children - young boys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>girls - adult people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>elderly people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Informants from a non-totally-Siwan family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sīwī</th>
<th>always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ʿāmmiyya</td>
<td>children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>young and adult people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>elderly people</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **In sum:**
  - *sīwī* is believed to be **always spoken** by all age categories
  - ʿāmmiyya is believed to be **less or not spoken** by categories which didn’t receive any schooling
• A: zamaan mamnuu‘ ḥadd yitkallim siwi…
  B: ya‘ani ee zamaan?
  B: wi fi l‘i‘adaadi?
  A: fi l‘i‘daadi ‘aadi…
  B: wi fi ssanawiyya?
  A: fi ssanawiyya kulla ḥaaga!

• “A: Before it was forbidden to speak sīwī…
  B: What do you mean by before?
  A: When I was at the Primary School, only Arabic!
  B: And in the Preparatory School?
  A: In the Preparatory School it was ok…
  B: What about the Secondary School?
  A: In Secondary School everything!”

(male/ 20y.old/ medium ed./ m.t. sīwī)
“If we learn in school Siwi and everywhere Siwi also we will make people speak just one language and they cannot speak with Arabic and they cannot speak with other people...because we are just 25 thousand and all the neighbours speak Arabic, you will be alone like it was. You will need translation to speak with others.”

(male/ 33y.old/ high ed./ m.t. sīwī)
“To have Siwi as school language it would be limiting for Siwans who could not move from Siwa neither finish their studies without knowing Arabic.”

(female/ 25y.old/ high ed./ m.t. sīwī + ʿāmmiyya )

“Schools teach Arabic because we need to be able to speak with people from outside Siwa”

(female/ 28y.old/ high ed./ m.t. sīwī )
“The Siwi language is alive and it wont die because everybody speaks Siwi at home. We are proud of our language. It will die if we start to speak Arabic to our children.”

(female/ 28y.old/ high ed./ m.t. sīwī)
### Reported language use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students with a totally-Siwan family</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>At home</strong></td>
<td>82% (94%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With friends</strong></td>
<td>56% (61%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In the suq (market)</strong></td>
<td>62% (66%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With teachers</strong></td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>In public offices</strong></td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>With non-Siwans</strong></td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“liḥadd dilwaʾti kull innās bitkallim siwi […] iḥna bnkallim siwi w lamma nkallim ʿarab nkallim maʿahum ʿarabi […] ʿakallim da min maṣr ʿakallimu ʿarabi yebʿa ee? ʿana ġayyartu lillahza bass, ʿinnama lamma argaʿ akkallim maʿaah siwi siwi”

“Until now all the people speak Siwi…we speak Siwi and when we talk to Arabs we talk to them in Arabic. I talk to one from Cairo, I speak Arabic: what happens? I changed only for a moment, since when I come back I speak with Siwans in Siwi.”

(male/ 45y.old/ Medium ed./ m.t. sīwī)
“lamma yigabil waahid siwi yikkallim ma‘aah siwi, lakin lamma yigabil waahid maṣrí yikkallim ma‘aah maṣrí”

“when he meets a Siwan he speaks with him Siwi, but when he meets an Egyptian he speaks with him Egyptian”

(male/ +80y. old/ low ed./ m.t. sīwī)

“Ma‘a ssiwiyyīn bakkallim siwi, ma‘a ilmaṣriyyīn bakkallim ʿāmmiyya”

“With Siwans I speak Siwi, with Egyptians I speak ʿāmmiyya.”

(male/ 20y. old/ medium ed./ m.t. sīwī)
“If I speak with a Siwan I have to speak by Siwi… We speak Siwi, if we speak Arabic or another language anyone says ‘What does he feel? **Does he feel he is better than other people?** He has to speak Siwi!’ Just if we speak to another one who doesn’t speak Siwi, ok we speak Arabic.”

(male/ 33y.old/ high ed./ m.t. ⽰힛 )
“illuġa lʿārabīyya di lāzim... mumkin truḥ makan āni wi tkallim innās barra siwa”

“This Arabic language is a must...you can go to another place and talk to people from outside Siwa”

(male/ +80y.old/ low ed./ m.t. sīwī)
Factors responsible for Siwans’ loyalty to their vernacular:

1. geographical concentration in the same territory and scarce mobility

   “min ġududna naḥna fi siwa!”
   “Since our ancestors we are in Siwa!”

2. strong sense of distinctiveness which allows the continuation of the sense of groupness

   “Siwi is something different from everywhere else”

3. high level of integration of the individual in the local community (peoples’ kin, work and friendship ties are all contracted within it)
Conclusion

A close-knit social network, which is more likely to be found in communities associated with a particular territory, acts as a mechanism encouraging speakers to maintain vernacular codes because it functions as a conservative force, that provides an alternative system of values and alternative linguistic norms to the dominant group’s ones.
Final remarks

1. The reported data come from a relatively short fieldwork and a relatively small sample: further study is needed in order to have a complete portray of the Siwan society, which is the aim of my PhD work.

2. Can this situation be maintained in the future, when all the population will be educated (thus Arabic-speaking) and more girls will apply for university studies? Will the Siwan society’s lifestyle remain traditional or will it open to modernity and change?
Bibliography


Thank you

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