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VOWEL “DISAPPEARANCE” IN BEJA

One remembers Werner Vycichl referring to Beja as “a language with seven seals”. Antique and medieval references which could be among the oldest about an African language continue to puzzle researchers dedicated to Cushitic and Afro-Asiatic as a whole. Here, scholars know the importance of Professor Andrzej Zaborski’s works. But his contribution about Beja is not only remarkable for its achievements, it renews the well-known opposition between diachronic and synchronic linguistics by paying an equal attention to contemporary data and to classical sources referring to an older stage of the language. Even if Beja is an African (i.e. unwritten) language, it deserves as far as possible a diachronic approach. Both are the links of the same chain. When comparing Greek “Blemmyes” and Beja *balami* (1989), or discussing the etymology and morphology of *Hadarâb* (1966), Andrzej Zaborski did not only provide major clues for the historian (here History meets its etymological sense of “enquiry”), he indicated a methodological framework to the newcomer I was in the field of Beja studies. I already said (D.M., 1999: 1) my debt for revealing to me the existence of Beja sound archives at the University of Khartoum and their written version (Mohamed Adarob O-Haj, 1972). Lucky enough to have access to them I was quickly convinced of the discrepancies with the European sources due to a misinterpretation of the vocalic system (with the notable exception of Roper). Another reason for such a gap in the field of Grammar and Phonology is the tendency of the linguists to rely on their data restricted to one dialect only when conclusions must go beyond a monographic approach. The Northern dialect for which the oldest written attestations are still found in the modern Beja spoken in Southern Egypt and Northern Sudan plays a key-role for comparative linguistics and dialectology.

The omission of the mid-central vowel [ə] is now a feature *in absentia* shared by recent descriptions which concentrated on Southern Beja. Even if unintentional, this “disappearance” reminds me the French novel *La Disparition* for which George Pérec took up the challenge of never writing *e* unless it is the most frequent vowel in French orthography. In Beja, the various descriptions

finished” / *ba’án* “I dreamt”. One can see that the tribal label refer in fact to Northern Beja even if the so-called “Atman dialect” is spoken in Port-Sudan, in Sinkat and elsewhere. Since all dialects exclude a three consonant sequence, the vowel [ə] is compulsory. We questioned Wedekind *u-mḏhán-oo(h)* instead of *i-məḏhan-ó* (/non subject case-existence-his/), [ə] being implied before the two consonants: *m-ə-ḏh* (Morin 2008-09: 276). The necessity of the vowel [ə] is relevant in an opposition such as: Northern Beja *’ówlə* “South” / Sinkat *’áwli*. Due to migrations and sociologic changes, the coherent solution is to consider the mid-central vowel as part of the “deep structure”, and its deletion as a contextual, free or dialectal variant. We proposed (Morin 1995: 22) to recognize in the seasonal migration zone of the Haḏánḏowa two Southern varieties, the Sinkat one (as described by Roper), the other being the Gash valley one. In his Ph. D thesis (1964: 7) Hudson refers to field-works in Port-Sudan but in his description (1976) which is supposed to take into account Beja as a whole his data seem to refer to bilingual Tigre-Beja speakers of the Tokar area with five vowel qualities and two contrastive lengths giving ten vowels altogether. If short vowel and allophonic variations are noted, the mid-central [ə] is not included in the inventory.

Stress and vowel deletion

In Beja the phonemic stress is accompanied by high pitch on a short syllable [á] and falling pitch (High-Low) on a long syllable: [áa]. Under stress, the only relevant oppositions are between *máda* “easy” and *màada* “pond”. We mentioned the role of stress in the vocalic inventory, emphasizing the link between focalisation and vowel deletion (Morin 1995: 33-34): *məhá* “morning”: subject definite *u-máha*; object *ó-m(a)ha* “the morning”; indefinite *mahá-b* “one /a morning”.

Since the common way to quote a noun is to use the object indefinite form (here *mahá-b*, see also before *Hadaráa-b*) the general tendency, also for the native speakers, is to omit the vowel which appears in the lexical (unmarked form *məhá*). This is also the case for verbs: *mehàas* “to lunch”; Gash *mhastínia* “you have lunch”, so that in a tentative dictionary, the lexicographer would have to decide between *məhá* or *meh-àas*. Roper (1928: 214) chose the verb entry *meh* and Reinisch *mah* (1895: 164). An historical example is offered by “Ali Bābā”, the Beja chief who was captured and deported to Baghdad. His exact name *Ólbāb* (Sanders 1933:124) was given in the accusative case **ó-libāb*. It is still in use today with the meaning “the-happiness” (Mohamed-Tahir: 128), although it seems to have been a royal title in the classical period.

Vowel variations are frequent in final position, as: *whiisay* or *whiisii* “under”, (Roper: 247) *uhii*. In such contexts, in the Gash dialect [i] or [e] appear, instead of [o] in the Bishari (Northern) dialect: Gash *r’é* “little dry-bed river: def. *tuu-r’í*; Northern *rə’ó*: indefinite *rə’ó-t*; def. *tuu-r’ó*. The variation Gash [i]/Bishari [u] when applied to case marking and to the predicate: *hada’àabi* “he is

the chief” (Northern *hada’àabu*) is one of the main isoglosses between Northern and Southern dialect, along with vowel lengthening: Southern *šúmee* “entering”, Northern *šúme*.

Vowels [e] and [i] may be in free variation: *másse* “year”; *gat mássi*, var. *gudàat mássə* “many years”, or be part of a relevant opposition: *hare* “camel”/ *hárrri* “sorgho” (Wedekind: 137 *hárru* is questionable) since one can only have [e, i, ə, a, o] in a final unstressed syllable.

The insistence put on mid-central [ə] gets some importance in verb morphology where many variants exist which imply to note past durative *rihitə* “she saw” (or *réhəta*) before *rhíta* (Wedekind: 94). It is part and parcel of the paradigm of *digi* “return”. Past: 1sg. *adgá* “I came back”; 2sg. *tədagá*; 3sg. *idəgá*. Whatever may be the dialect variations (see paradigms in: Zaborski 1975), one sees that [ə] alternates with the “stable” vowels.

Vowel deletion in a short open syllable or after a stressed syllable can be obligatory in front on laryngeal: *y-hindi* “the tree”, regular (when focalized): *tòorba* “the mountain of Kassala (*réba*); or optional: *hàa m’aa* or *háí mə’aa* “come with me”; Gash *òo-’t’a* “the moment: then, now”, North *òo-’t’a*.

The interpretation of the diphthong must be clarified in relation with the phonemic status of [y] which is the realization of /i/ in consonant position: *tisaysa* “you have preferred”/ *tisaiisa* “you prefer”; unless it is the second element of a diphthong: *n’ait* “goats” / *n’éit* “a goat”.

Finally, the following quatrain (in: Roper 1927: 150), also quoted in a two-line format (in: Mohamed Adarob O-Haj 1972: 11) summarizes the three types of variations encountered:

Roper: <i>te šankéte baas’aabik</i>	(Contrary to those) with clothes caught
<i>yi hindi te tàageyeté</i>	In the thorn bushes, and also skull-caps,
<i>u r’ad át’aféyaa bàaqəhiin daa</i>	Who died protecting their family
<i>dáwit téteb abaaqén</i>	He, he has forgotten his relatives

Adarob: *tišanketee baas’aabiik yhindi titaagiyaytee*
uur’ad at’affiyaa baahin ar dawitayteeb ibaaqin

1. Differences in length and/or quality of the vowels (the length as [i] being a Southern feature): *te-šankéte* / *ti-šanket-èè* “the-edge (of the cloth)-their”; *te-tàageyetèè* / *ti-taagiyayt-èè* “the-skull-cap-their”

abaaqén / *ibaaqin* “they have forgotten”

baas’aabik / *bàa-s’aabiik*, negative intensive of *’abik* “seize”: cause to seize strongly”. The long final *ii* is a Gash variant (see before *šúmee*).

u-r’ad / *uu-r’ad* “the house, the family”. The difference of length in the prefix is linked to a double interpretation of a word which got also a dissyllabic form *r’áda* (Roper, 1928: 227) in the Sinkat dialect. It can be interpreted as CVCV dissyllable with initial stress and a short *u* or as a monosyllable in the Gash with a long *uu* (Morin 1995: 41).

2. Vowel deletion: verse parallelism and focalisation explain after *te-šankéte* “the-edge” *yi-híndi* “the-bushes” (instead of *yhíndi* in normal speech).

3. Free variation: Roper *bàa-dəhin daa* “people (*daa*) who do not live (*bàa-dəhin*)” / Adarob *bàa-hin ’ar* “neg.-fly away-children; *dáwit tēteb* / *dawitayt-ēeb* “are close-who: the relatives”.

Oral Poetry

Since the vowel is the centre of the syllable in a syllabic structure: (C) (/h)V(:)(C) (t), counting them is the key-issue in versification. It has already been defined as a rhythmic prose (Morin 1999, chap 4). Again, the notation of the mid-central [ə] appears crucial. Roper’s quatrain above under with Adarob’s counterpart implies a difference with speech prosody. The quatrain is based on a scansion whose calculation starts from the end of the second and fourth segment with an accentuation of the penultimate syllable and of the third syllable before it. The parallelism supposes the change from *títaagiyaytèe* to [tí-taa-gi-yáytee] creating an interval [X--X], identical in [dawitáy-teeb-i-bàaḍin] (in normal speech *dawitaytēeb ibaaḍin*). Vowel deletion is restricted to segments not implied in the scansion or non focalised (see Roper *yi hindi*; Adarob *yhindi*). It must not either contradict the lexical “deep structure”: *bàa-dəhin* (not *bāḍhin) imperative neg. of *dəhan* “to live” or *dahan*. For that reason a vowel in the first syllable is compulsory (see *məḍhano* before).

Since this scansion [X--X] is not unique, vowel deletion (including [ə]) is observed or not according to the parallelism of the verse. Here, a fourteen-syllable metre implies *òo-ⁿt’a* instead of *òo-ⁿtə’a* “the moment: now”; *dha* “for, on”, instead of *dəha*, or *deha* (Adarob O-Haj, in: Morin 2003: 508):

oo-ⁿt’a	eebtik	mhaloot	magnaf-dha	’abbarnanéttay
the-moment	between	two	kneeling down-for	we measured
ti-faḍgaat-oon	’o-ⁿhoob	Tahamiyam	šumnanéttay	
the-fourth-our	the-when	Tahamiyam	we entered	

“Between [our departure] and now, the camels kneeled down twice only
On the fourth day, at the same hour as now, we entered Tahamiyam”

When not implied by metrics, *dəha* occurs regularly and becomes relevant for differentiating (excerpts from an unpublished folktale):

Northern pronunciation:

tuu-kàam	òo-ⁿtə’a	tuu-ⁿgàat	i-dar-ii	dəhà	kilís-tidi een
the-camel	the-moment	the-one	the-side-of	on	she leant they said

Southern: **ti-kàam òo-ⁿt’a ti-ⁿgàat i-dar-ii dhá kilís tidi een**

“[Of the two] one she-camel at that moment leant on one side, they said.”

Conclusion

The exclusion of [ə] of the vowel inventory hinders an exhaustive presentation of the Prosody, Morphology and Beja Oral Poetry. It also makes more difficult lexical comparison within Cushitic. The more conservative Northern dialect on which we have the first written references should be included in any comparison. For instance, modern Beja *l'ib* “to pull” appears as an evolution of *le'ab* [lə'ab] which Reinisch (1895: 155) compared to Ge'ez *saḥaba* (Saho and Afar *sab*, Somali *sib*). See also Beja *bə'a* “finish”, Somali *ba'a: ba'ayay* “I am lost!” These few examples show the necessity, as Andrzej Zaborski did (when opposing to the “classical” rumour that Beja was not a Cushitic language), of going up “old” roads leading to even more findings, and confirming the key-role of “a language with seven seals” in our understanding of the Cushitic phylum.

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