

Replacement of Interrogative Pronouns in Arabic Dialects: Motives and Mechanisms

The basic facts regarding the development of the interrogative pronouns ‘who’ and ‘what’ in Arabic dialects are well established (Singer 1958, Fischer and Jastrow 1980, Versteegh 2007). “For the pronoun ‘what?’, almost all modern dialects have a form containing the word *šay*’ [ʃajʃ] ‘thing’. Reflexes of Classical Arabic *mā* [ma:] are found only in Yemeni Arabic” (Versteegh 2007:388). For ‘who’ most dialects continue a form of the Classical Arabic *man*, although several dialects have replaced this as well (e.g. Moroccan Arabic *əʃkun*.)

This replacement is somewhat surprising in a pan-Afroasiatic perspective, as *m-type interrogatives, presumably cognate with Classical Arabic *ma:* and *man* are widespread across the phylum and have generally been regarded as one of the important diagnostics for inclusion of a language in the phylum.

I hypothesize that the motivation for this replacement is entirely system internal, namely the resolution of a potential ambiguity between the interrogative *ma:* and the phonemically identical negative particle *ma:*. The latter particle has a contextually restricted distribution in Classical Arabic, but has been analogically extended as the general marker of negation throughout the dialects. The two developments happen in tandem: spread of negative, loss of interrogative.

This nonetheless leaves a number of questions such as where the negative *ma:* came from in the first place, and why the ambiguity was resolved by replacing the interrogative rather than the negative (as has been done in Modern Written Arabic).

References

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Workshop title

Stability and Borrowability of Interrogative Pronominals (Dmitry IDIATOV)

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