

## INTRODUCTION

To what extent is Modern Standard Arabic (hereafter MSA), as it is used nowadays in the spoken media, uniform on a syntactic level? Is there within MSA a certain degree of variation? This is the central topic of this study. Modern Standard Arabic is the official and national language in nineteen member states of the Arabic League.<sup>1</sup> In all these states MSA is used daily in the media and in official documents. MSA is not a 'dead' language, but a living language that is used daily by a large number of people. We agree completely with the proposition of Stetkevych (1970: 116), viz.: "MSA has become a usable functional language." In the different countries of the Arab League, books are published as regularly as clockwork, newspapers and magazines are being published, and also on radio and television a lot of programs use MSA.

The question arises whether the language in such a large area is likely to show a quite large degree of variation, even if it concerns a standard language.<sup>2</sup> Until now there are, as far as we know, no empirical studies that prove the possible uniformity or regional variation within MSA. What we do know is that there exists an important variation between the Arabic dialects.<sup>3</sup> There are different impressions and assumptions about

<sup>1</sup> Except Somalia (Abuhamdia 1988: 1239)

<sup>2</sup> There seems to exist a clear variation between the 'standard' English language as it is used in the US and the UK. El Hassan points out that there is variation in spelling, phonology, lexicon and syntax where he writes: "Similarly, lexical variation is exemplified by the occurrence of pairs of items like 'side-walk' (USA) and 'pavement' (Britain), 'fall' and 'autumn' and so on. (...) The above are only a few illustrative examples of variability in Modern Standard English. Some of them are regionally bound, others cut across regional boundaries." (El Hassan 1977: 118). Within the spoken language that variation is even bigger. "Now, regional and social heterogeneity in speech exists in all languages. Take English as an example; within the same country (Britain) Quirk observes 'The divergence between one man's English and another is great enough to be striking... and is growing seriously wide.'" (1982: 37). A stronger assertion comes from Baines and Brewer (1977: xvi) "English is a set of languages distinguished from other sets, e.g. the Russian (set). (...) The point to emphasize here is that speech is universally heterogeneous. Heterogeneity is the norm... its absence would be pathological" (Abuhamdia 1988: 1241).

<sup>3</sup> A difference can be made between variation within dialects and variation between different dialects. The investigation of variation in dialects is concentrated for the greater part on Egypt. "Almost all of the work done in this area was done on variation in Egyptian Arabic" (Eid 1990: 23).

the Modern Arabic Standard language that have never been based on a detailed empirical investigation. Versteegh (1984) e.g. describes MSA as a “highly uniform language that is essentially identical with classical Arabic.”<sup>4</sup> We find the same opinion in Cowan (1970).<sup>5</sup>

El-Ezabi (1967: 175) writes about MSA: “The importance of written Arabic is indicated by the position it occupies in the Arabic-speaking countries. It is the language of books and newspapers and, when read, of broadcasting stations, as for example in news broadcasts. (...) It is, therefore, the only language which all educated Arabs have in common. Its structure has been kept *intact* throughout the centuries, and *uniform* throughout the Arabic-speaking world, due mainly to the conservative influence of the Qur’an, the Moslems’ Holy Book.” (*my italics*).

In this way, El-Ezabi expresses the opinion of a large group of Arabs, but also of Arab grammarians, that the Arabic language is in fact, synchronically as well as diachronically, completely uniform. A large number of contemporary Arab descriptions of the ‘Arabic language’ are entirely based on corpora of classical Arabic texts, with the *Qur’ān* occupying the most important place. It is assumed that the language is only correctly used when it is completely in agreement with the grammatical rules as they were deduced from ‘traditional’ writings. According to these grammarians the grammatical rules that were deduced out of the *Qur’ān* and other earlier writings are still applicable to MSA. Such researchers refuse to take the language as it is actually used nowadays as a basis for their investigations, because in their opinion there is only one correct grammar that is considered to be the norm in all circumstances. It therefore seems interesting to compare our findings in this study with the norm as it is postulated in a few traditional Arabic grammars to check whether and where precisely we can determine a possible diachronic variation.<sup>6</sup>

When we consider language as a dynamic fact and investigate other text corpora we are likely to discover new regularities that offer another

<sup>4</sup> Ditters (1992: 4).

<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Gully (1993) observes certain developments in Modern Arabic of which the importance is not quite clear to him: “We would suggest that the compilation of a comprehensive description of modern Arabic would constitute a sound beginning in the attempt to establish exactly how significant these developments are.” (1993: 56)

<sup>6</sup> We will only indicate whether there is a deviation of the norm, which might be an indication of evolution. We are aware that a possible diachronic variation can not be determined this way with a 100% certainty. There is a possibility that certain classical texts also show deviations with regard to the norm. Only when we compare classical corpora with modern corpora can we obtain a greater certainty about possible evolution and diachronic variation.

view on the linguistic reality and lead to a more balanced judgment. As Blau writes: “The theoretical notion of a uniform and invariable Standard Arabic obtains till our day, and this is factually true as to spelling and morphology, with only a few changes in syntax” (Blau 1981: 17), but he also adds that, in case of a diachronic analysis of the classical Arabic language, this language variety does not seem to be completely uniform: “Even Classical (Literary, Standard) Arabic is not completely uniform. Important differences obtain between pre-Classical Arabic and the classic secular prose of the early Abbassid age” (Blau 1981: 148).

It is quite obvious that native speakers of Arabic have a strong desire for a uniform united language. Monteil (1960: 26) pointed out the need of the masses for a common international language ‘qui est normalisée et unifiée’. In this context he referred to the statement of *Al-Ḥusri* (1957) that the ‘standard language’ ought to be *muwaḥḥida and muwaḥḥada*, that is “unificatrice et unifiée”. As a matter of fact, language is often seen as a homogenic unity. “Most of the linguistic research done so far tends to treat language and varieties thereof as if they were coherent, homogeneous static systems, with a minimum of variation or none at all” (Meiseles 1980: 121).<sup>7</sup>

However, not everybody shares the view that MSA is indeed a *reasonably* uniform language. Tarrier, for instance, takes the view that MSA shows a large regional differentiation due to the influence of the dialects. “Présenter un MSA comme homogène pour tous les pays arabes revient à nier l’influence des différents dialectes dont les différences mêmes devraient faire varier le MSA” (Tarrier 1991: 6-7). According to Diem (1974: 2) there are big differences between the MSA of the East and the MSA of North Africa. Without further pursuing the matter, Diem states that the *impression* of unity of the Arabic language is caused by the great difference between the different Arabic dialects. Farhat (1989: 7) feels the same. “MSA is continuing to evolve along two major lines, the North African and the Eastern. Although both use basically the same grammar and word set, some words have different meanings, fre-

<sup>7</sup> According to Blau this is to a great extent true for Arabic. “For the majority of Arab linguists, with few exceptions, only one uniform Classical Arabic exists, which alone is worthy of imitation. And this claim of uniformity and invariability is even to a great extent true in the fields of spelling and morphology, and to a lesser degree, also in the domain of syntax” (Blau 1981: 150). The uniformity of MSA is also stressed by Parkinson (1990: 289) who writes: “It is admitted that Standard Arabic has many variable aspects, although a fair observer must also admit that it also has an enormous number of invariable aspects as well.”

quency and contexts of usage.”<sup>8</sup> According to Harrell (1960: 3) ‘Classical Arabic’ is relatively uniform throughout the Arab world. About the spoken form he writes: “We may assume a priori, however, that spoken ‘Classical Arabic’ is not entirely uniform from one set of cultural conditions to another or from one geographical area to another.”

Also Ditters (1991: 200) holds the view that there is *strong* variation in MSA. He even talks about a few new versions of MSA. “Since the 19th century onwards we believe to have been confronted with a number of new versions of MSA. In any case, we witness variation in the use of MSA depending on factors as the progress in time and the geographical spreading by way of interference with colloquial varieties. We also assume factors of variation based on differences in subject-matter, register, genre, style, target-group, frequency of appearance and a few more.”

And in a later work he adds: “However, on the other hand the mention of regional varieties suggests that MSA deviates from the Classical norm and is less uniform than presumed. This observation tallies with the observation of Arab and Arabic linguists that the language of a Moroccan newspaper is different from one from Somalia (!) or Kuwait. It is, however, not (yet) clear in what respect these regional varieties of MSA exactly differ from each other and to what extent they differ as a group from *their common origin*, Classical Arabic” (my italics) (Ditters 1992: 5). These quotations clearly show that contradictory *impressions* exist about the uniformity of MSA. Moreover, in none of these works is it clearly specified why one has the *impression* that there may or may not be variation within MSA. The authors limit themselves to non-quantifiable concepts such as *big* or *small* variation without indicating on what basis their findings are based.

Investigation into variation within a language demands a few specifications, however. In the first place one has to know what exactly is meant by the concept of variation and in the second place one has to know which variety is to be investigated. Even in this short introduction it appears that not everybody uses the same terminology for one and the same variety. What is called MSA by one person is called Classical Arabic by another person (cf. *infra* 2.3.5.). First of all it is incumbent that we obtain a very clear insight in the big unity that is indicated by ‘Ara-

<sup>8</sup> As the only (!) example to sustain his claim he quotes the words *najā’a* (*benefit*) and *’ahşaru* (*shorter*) which are, according to his view, used less (!) in the Middle-East. In any case, the question can be raised whether these two examples alone can suffice as an indication of regional diversity in MSA. Both words are extremely rare. The word *’ahşaru* is not even in Wehr’s dictionary (1971). The word is in Abdel-Nour’s dictionary (1983) which was published in the Middle-East (Beirut).

bic', and to define and name the different varieties that might exist. This big unity, that is indicated by the word 'Arabic', is in itself already very varied.<sup>9</sup>

Further on, a distinction has to be made between the (possibly spontaneous) spoken language and the written language. Probably the variation in the (spontaneous) spoken language is much greater than in the written language. When authors talk about variation, it is not always clear whether they mean dialects or standard language.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, one has to specify in which domain variation is to be investigated. One can investigate variation in spelling, morphology, lexicon, phonology, pronunciation or syntax.<sup>11</sup> It is quite possible that variation is abundantly found on the phonological level, but that it occurs much more limited on the lexical level, and even more limited on the syntax level.

It is important to limit the investigation to only one aspect, because in the investigation of variation, uniformity also matters. If we do not take into account the common features of the language and if we only want to demonstrate variation, we run the risk of erroneously stressing variation in a one-sided fashion, which will produce a very biased view of the language. Geerts rightly remarks that "in such contexts all attention is drawn to the differences and not to the common aspects, which in a variation linguistical approach seems to be essential. Without common features no statistical correlation is possible." (Geerts 1992: 62).

<sup>9</sup> Schippers writes (1987: 80): "Every language community knows variation. Besides the regional variations (the dialects) and the social variations that are characteristic for some classes in the society (the sociolects), every speaker has different registers (language levels) to adapt his language to the circumstances, the mood, the person one is speaking to, etc. In language communities where more than one language exists, the speaker can make use of the different languages to create variation."

<sup>10</sup> This is, for instance, the case in the study by Bentahila: "Further divergence results from the fact that in different parts of the Arab world borrowings are likely to be drawn from different sources. (...) These differences of background and viewpoint mean that quite frequently there is no agreement even between two of the language academies on the term they recommend for a particular purpose; it is then hardly surprising if no uniformity is achieved among actual users of the language" (Bentahila 1991: 77).

<sup>11</sup> Some people claim that even technical terminology in MSA is not uniform. "La lexicologie juridique, par exemple, n'est pas encore unifiée. Le terme utilisé en Egypte pour désigner le Procureur général (an nâ'eb el 'âm)(sic) est considérablement différent de celui employé au Liban et en Syrie (al mudda'i el 'âm)(sic). Il en est de même pour le "conseil d'Etat" appelé en Egypte (Majless ed dawlat)(sic) et au Liban et en Syrie (Majless el Choura) (sic)" (Mattar 1986: 257). In my opinion, difference in terminology takes nothing away from the unity of the language, certainly when it concerns collocations. Both collocations fit completely within the lexicon of MSA, and can be understood in the whole area without problems.

As far as the investigation of variation within language is concerned, a distinction can be made between *vertical variation*, namely, the variation between different styles or levels of speech within one area; and *horizontal variation*, namely the variety within one speech level over a vaster area. We can also make a distinction between *diachronic variation*, where we compare the previous use of the language with the contemporary language use and *synchronic variation*, where we exclusively investigate the language use during one period of time.<sup>12</sup>

There are a few investigations into vertical variation within one area that have been conducted, especially in Egypt (cf. *infra* 4.1.). In the domain of horizontal variation different investigations have been conducted on a dialectical level. As far as I know, there are no investigations of MSA that deal with the horizontal variation of this variety. What we do know is that there exists within MSA a *normative variation* (cf. *infra* 1.1.4.), which means that the language user has a choice of several possibilities for a given structure. He can, for instance, choose between the particle *lam* + jussive or *mā* + past tense for past events.<sup>13</sup> We do not know whether there exists some regional variation in these items.

It is clear, however, that regional variation can emerge out of contacts between different varieties or other languages.<sup>14</sup> Not all scholars, however, consider such differences in the standard language as variation. According to Geerts (1992: 61), in that case we do not talk anymore about variation, but about code-switching and interference, this in contrast with van Marle (1992: 5) who assumes that variation within the standard language is precisely caused by the influence of the dialects. MSA of the media can also be influenced through translations from French or English. In this work we will not go deeper into this aspect because it requires another methodological approach.

In this first investigation, we want to keep the concept of variation as open as possible. Indeed, it is not obvious to identify the elements that influence a language with a 100 % certainty, because different factors together can exert an influence on the language (cf. *infra* 5.6.). It is im-

<sup>12</sup> We also remark here that variation can also exist in the language use of one speaker. This variation, which Labov called ‘inherent variation’, also exists in the speech of native speakers of Arabic (cf. El-Hassan 1977: 122).

<sup>13</sup> Of course, this choice is conditional by syntax and semantics. True ‘free variation’ is probably very rare.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ditters (1992: 5): “Regional varieties of MSA could be explained by different forms of language contact (Arabic with non-Arabic and written Arabic with spoken Arabic)”.

portant first of all to define the concept *standard language*, to know how it functions and then to investigate its variability. Before conducting an investigation into the syntactical variation within the MSA of radio news broadcasts (hereafter MSA-RN) we have to know what is understood by *standard language* in general and MSA more in particular.

In the first chapter we pursue the notion of standard language in greater depth and we investigate what the characteristics of a standard language are. Because of the fact that the Arabic linguistic reality is very complex on the one hand, and because a lot of scholars use different terminologies to describe elements of this Arabic linguistic reality on the other hand, it is also necessary to give a short description of the Arabic language situation and the place of MSA. In the second chapter we describe the Arabic language situation as it has developed during its long history. The stress in this chapter will be put on diachronic variation.

In the third and the fourth chapters we discuss the vertical variation within the Arabic language, and the different approaches about this topic. Next we try to show in the fifth chapter that these varieties do not stand alone, but influence each other, and finally, in the sixth chapter, we examine the importance and the propagation of MSA as a standard language in the Arab world.