

## Arabic Loans in West African Languages A Study in Semantics<sup>1</sup>

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In the last two decades most of my researches were devoted to collecting Arabic loans in West African languages in a large data base<sup>2</sup> and to produce articles on how the Arabic phonemes of such loans were rendered in each of those single African languages.<sup>3</sup> At that time I did not pay attention to the semantic of the loans.<sup>4</sup> This Workshop gives me the opportunity to start some considerations on how these loans were modified in those languages, if they did, their meaning and to give a general overview to such shift in their semantic modifications.

Before starting the analysis and giving examples of major modifications in this shift, I would like to have some general reflections on this topic. In Arabic the word Arab is synonymous of Bedouin, the two roots (*'arab* and *bdw*) having the same meaning. In this regard it could be interesting to reflect on the word *samak* 'fish' we find in Arabic under the root *sammaka* II 'to make thick, thicken' (Wehr 431a): the meaning of the word does not have any relation with the root meaning and we could easily suppose that it is itself a loan in Arabic, being connected to this root, for the presence of the same radicals in it. Obviously this conclusion is the consequence of what I said previously: originally the Arabic peoples were not sailors, they came into contact with the sea culture in the Persian Gulf through people from Mesopotamia, before the spread to West. This word is not present

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I presented at "Workshop on Language Contact and Change in West Africa: The Question of Areality and Genealogy" (Gumpoldskirchen/Austria, November 11-14, 2004), I am heavily relying for the African languages on the dictionaries quoted: i.e. for Fulfulde, a language spoken in a vast area comprised from Senegambia up to Cameroun and divided in many dialects, the data quoted from Taylor's dictionary and regarding Adamawa region could be not true for Fulfulde spoken in other parts of Africa.

<sup>2</sup> Baldi (2008, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> See my articles in References.

<sup>4</sup> Except, maybe, Baldi (1989: 285-301).

among loans in any West African language, where the local words are still in existence (cf. Fulfulde *līngu*, Hausa *kāfī*, Kanuri *būnyi*, *bānyi*, Songhay (Dendi) *ísà há̀m̀*), but we find it, *samaki*, in Swahili, where it took over the Bantu old word for fish, *nswi*. So the language is reflecting an environment typical of the desert and so, in a certain way, different from the places where Islam spread: i.e. *sūr* ‘wall; fence’ (see Table 18) became Fulfulde *sōrowol* ‘rectangular, flat-roofed house’; Hausa *sōrō* ‘entrance room of compound’ (via Kanuri); Kanuri *shóró/sóró* ‘rectangular room’; Mbay *sōrō* ‘top (spinning) made from snail shell’; Songhay *sooroo* ‘étage (supérieur); pont supérieur (de bateau)’ (? via Hausa), but Swahili *sera* ‘fort, castle’, a good example in another geographical and cultural contest.

A second factor to observe is related to the reason that Arabic was considered a language of prestige, being written, so in many cases words were borrowed even if there was not at all a real necessity (i.e. words connected to the Islamic religion or to the new different civilisation). That is the case of Arabic *ḍakar* ‘penis’ (see Table 16) which became *azakārī* in Hausa and was used by educated men as for *bū#ā* ‘cock’, as marked by Robinson (1925: 23b) in his dictionary. But if we go deeply in research on this topic, we can easily find that in many languages the word was borrowed and took over the previously existing one, which automatically got the status, from that time on, of a vulgar meaning: Fulfulde *mbasu*, Kanuri *ngáli*, Mandinka *fóto*, Wolof *kooy*. Other examples are Arabic *dubr* ‘buttocks’ (see Table 9) whose loan put aside the previous equivalent word in Fulfulde (*gugu*), Kanuri (*ndôr*).

Some other examples of this “puritan” spirit of the Muslim religion, which modified the more liberal customs of West African peoples, could be found in words related to parts of the human body which are avoided in speaking according to the sexual phobia of the Muslim religion.

Arabic *farj* ‘pudendum of the female, vulva’ took the place of Fulfulde *kuttu*, Hausa *dūrī*, but it seemed not to have had any effect on Kanuri words, such as *kamurám* or *kəshiganarám*, still marked in the dictionary *polite*, and I am wondering, on the contrary, if *fárgi* has a bad connotation: in this case it could have been a good example of the contrary of what has been said up to now.

Arabic *ḥaiḍ* ‘menstruation’ (Table 7), with its euphemism, took over Fulfulde *lotgol*, *tuundi*, Kanuri *bū*.

In Africa, where almost all languages were unwritten, Arabic appeared to be the expression of a superior civilisation for its tradition of

being a written language, whose prominent prestige was represented by the Holy Koran. The Koranic teaching admitted the writing on a wooden board with ink manufactured on the spot, generally there making to deep some nails or pieces of iron in a decoction of tannin. So in most languages were introduced some words related to writing, sometimes with a shift of meaning (see Table 13). It is the case of *dawāh* ‘inkwell’, that in most languages got the meaning of ‘ink’ for the probably Tamasheq intermediary *teddeouat*, as shown by the initial *t-* and where it has both meanings of ‘inkwell’ and ‘ink’, but it arrived into Hausa, and later, through it, it past in Dagbani, Yoruba and maybe in Nupe, with the only meaning of ‘ink’.

An example of changing the meaning, in this case from the person performing the action to the instrument, is the word *hajjām* ‘cupper’, which also became in West African languages a synonym of ‘barber’, because the person was doing both actions, and later we find *gbàjámò* ‘razor’ in Yoruba (Table 6), where it is the only occurrence of such a shift. On the other side we have Arabic *adān* ‘call to prayer’ (Table 1), which becomes ‘muezzin’ in almost all the languages, probably for Songhay/Kanuri intermediary.

In Bargery’s Hausa dictionary we find *bahàrā* ‘a notorious prostitute’, which I believe is an interesting semantic specialization coming from Arabic *baḥr* ‘sea; large river’ (Table 3). An analogous example is found in Kotoko *’alkámā* and in Mbay *gámē / gémē*, where the meaning is ‘spaghetti’ coming from Arabic *qamḥ* ‘wheat’ (Table 27). In Kanuri we observe that *boksûr* ‘tumor’, connected to Arabic *bāsûr* ‘haemorrhoids’ (Table 4), but I do not know if it is an evolution of the language, because in Lukas’ grammar we find it as meaning ‘piles’.

All that has been said up to now is more or less comprehensible, analysing each item, except in one case (Table 17), where for Bore *misiri*, Prost (1983: 13) gives ‘mosquée; bar’. If the meaning given by Prost is right, we could imagine that Bore speaking people were not at all Muslim and the only mosque there was near a bar: that reminds me what happened in Swahili where *gereza* ‘prison’ comes from Portuguese *igreja* ‘church’ and the explanation is found in Sacleux’ Swahili dictionary (1939: 249a): “nom qui avait prévalu à Mobasa pour désigner la citadelle portugaise à cause de la chapelle qui en faisait partie”.

At last, I hope, with these few examples, to have given some ideas of work which could be done analysing my corpus, that is to appear

next year, based on 3020 Arabic etymons present in some 120 West African languages, plus Swahili and some other languages like Berber (Tamasheq) and liNgala, when they were intermediaries in transmitting Arabic loans.

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