

The Middle East in London

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THIS ISSUE: Endangered Languages

- Losing our language diversity • The death of Zoroastrian Dari in Kerman • The Modern South Arabian languages • Korandje from the 12th to the 21st century • The case of Siwi • The language of the 'Middle Eastern Gypsies' • What if, 100 years on, school is not enough?
- **PLUS** Reviews and events in London



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The Middle East in London

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Valentina Schiattarella investigates the linguistic differences between the Siwi spoken by men and women

A gender-based language disparity in a conservative society? The case of Siwi



© Valentina Schiattarella

A Siwi girl working with silver. Women do not wear traditional silver jewellery anymore in the oasis even though some local associations and NGOs organise workshops and training to teach young women the art of traditional silverwork

Siwi is a Berber language (Afro-asiatic phylum) spoken in the Siwa oasis, Egypt. The population consists of about 25,000 Siwis and 5,000 foreigners (coming mainly from other Egyptian cities). Siwi is also spoken in another small oasis – 130 km far from Siwa – called El Gara.

Because of long-standing contact with Arabic, Siwi has lost many Berber linguistic features. Arab interaction with Siwa has a long history: according to the geographer Al Idrisi, there have been Arabs living within the Berber population in the oasis since the 12th century. Nowadays, many workers (mainly from Upper Egypt) live in Siwa and

many Siwis go to Libya or other Egyptian cities to study or work.

From a socio-cultural perspective, Siwa is a highly conservative, gender-segregated society. After marrying very young, women are not allowed to have contact with men outside their family. Instead they spend all their time caring for family members, rarely going outside their home.

Given the rapid loss of the unique attributes of their traditional society and the endangerment of the language, does it make sense to talk about language disparity between men and women? The following observations are mainly based on linguistic

research focussing on women of different ages, married with Siwi or Arabic speakers.

The level of endangerment of the language

While Siwi is the language used everywhere in Siwa – and it is still passed on from generation to generation – Arabic is used in official contexts, at school and in communicating with Arabic-speaking foreigners. With the exception of children under school age and some very old people, almost the entire population of Siwa is bilingual.

UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger and Ethnologue, tools that collect mainly information about the degree of endangerment of a

Siwa is a highly conservative, gender-segregated society

Women and men sometimes differ in the vocabulary they use, and the type of production can also differ. But this reflects more social and behavioural attitudes than real linguistic differences

language and the size of its population, give conflicting data. Ethnologue classifies Siwi as 'vigorous': meaning that it is still used in communication among all ages. UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger says that it is 'definitely endangered' and not learned as a mother tongue at home anymore by children. The truth is somewhere in between: Siwi *is* used by Siwis of all ages in everyday communication, *but* there are important reasons why the language should now legitimately be considered endangered.

The facts that, to different extents, indicate that the threat to the language is very high include: (1) Siwa was made part of Egypt in 1820 by Muhammad Ali. The only officially recognised language of Egypt is Arabic; (2) a first Arabic-only school was established in the oasis in 1928; (3) travel and contact with foreigners has significantly increased in the last 30 years; (4) the first road connecting Siwa to the coastal city of Marsa Matruh was built in the 1980s; (5) electricity and subsequently television arrived in the 1980s; (6) intermarriage between Arabic speakers and Siwi speakers has become very common in the last few years.

The last point seems to be the most relevant when explaining the endangerment of the language. Intermarriage (in this case between Siwi and Arabic speakers) is a critical factor. It impacts a key to the survival of any language: its transmission from parents to children. If a Siwi woman marries an Arabic-speaking man, Arabic becomes the language used at home and with children. When a Siwi man marries an Arabic-speaking woman, Siwi is used but to a much lesser extent, especially if the couple emigrate to a city where this language is not spoken at all – such as Marsa Matruh on the Egyptian Mediterranean coast or other Egyptian or Libyan cities.

Is there really a gender-based language disparity in a conservative society?

Siwi's endangerment is obviously linked to contact with Arabic, the predominant major language. But it should be clear that, in general, language contact does not necessarily lead to the endangerment of a language. Unless there are very strong forces acting from the top, what is often crucial

is the attitude of speakers toward their language (for example, to what degree they consider it prestigious or useful) and/or the sum of several factors, like the ones listed previously for Siwi.

Given the conservatism of the society and the fact that Siwi-speaking women are not exposed to the same number of Arabic speakers as Siwi-speaking men, it seems reasonable to wonder if socio-cultural factors could lead to a gender-based language disparity.

Investigation indicated that there is no real difference linguistically between the language spoken by men and that spoken by women. Indeed, the language of women is not more 'conservative' than that used by men, and it was somewhat disappointing to discover that some aspects of the language, clearly induced by the contact with Arabic, were found more frequently in women's speech while men sometimes retained more conservative ones.

This generalisation has not been statistically validated, but it does show that, even in a very conservative society, all members can be exposed to the same influence from the predominant language.

Taking a closer look at the factors of endangerment listed above, it is clear that, with the exception of travel and contact with foreigners (because in general women do not travel unless they have to move with their husband and do not have contact with foreigners who are not family members), all the other factors influence women as much as men – especially schooling, television and intermarriage.

Nevertheless, differences must clearly be noted elsewhere: women and men sometimes differ in the vocabulary they use (there are specific parts of the lexicon that are more likely to be found among women than among men and vice versa) and the type of production can also differ: the transmission of tales (i.e. storytelling) is, for example, a domain that generally belongs to Berber women. But this is not a language-

specific phenomenon and reflects more social and behavioural attitudes than real linguistic differences.

Documenting data from Siwi-speaking women was important because it created an opportunity to understand at what point all the dynamics that affect the vitality of a language are stronger than its conservatism. It gave the opportunity to research whether there are strong contact-induced influences on the language spoken by women and to observe the main factors that lead to the endangerment of the language, such as the choice not to use Siwi in communication between mother and child in mixed couples. Moreover, collecting folktales became an occasion, for some women, to gather all the children together and revive the practice of storytelling which has for the most part disappeared because of television. In general, the data documented is testimony to a language that still feels alive to its speakers – even if it is facing strong threats to its vitality.

Valentina Schiattarella has a PhD in Linguistics (EPHE, Paris) with a thesis on the Siwi language. She was awarded a small grant from ELDP for a project entitled: 'Linguistic Documentation of the variety of Berber spoken in the Siwa Oasis of Egypt'



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A view of the dunes near Siwa. This desert region is called The Great Sand Sea and stretches from eastern Libya to western Egypt