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National standardization: field collection of names

African geographical names and the Arabic writing system: investigating an obstacle to standardization

Submitted by the Sudan**

Introduction:

      The Sudan faces a mammoth task of representing African geographical names in the Arabic writing system. A standardized approach would be clearly advantageous. However, there are competing traditions for applying Arabic characters to non-Arabic sounds. These competing traditions sometimes create confusion and pose an impediment to standardization.

      The present investigation will deal with the existing alphabets of Arabic and Farsi. It will not deal with the controversial question of creating new Arabic characters to accommodate geographical names from non-Arabic languages. This question has been dealt with elsewhere in recent publications, Abu Bakr (1992, see also 1978), Abu Manga (1999) and Bell (2000a and 2000b).

An Illustration from Recent Fieldwork:

      Initially this investigation will focus on a particular geographical name from recent fieldwork in Sudanese Nubia. The name is Taajáab. It is located in the area of the Third Cataract of the Nile on the west bank (19° 52' N/ 30° 18' E). Taajáab was investigated most recently in January 2002 by Muhammad Jalal Hashim and Herman Bell in cooperation with the Sudan National Committee for Geographical Names. Their Survey of Nubian Place-names formed an integral part of the interdisciplinary Mahas Project of the Department of Archaeology of the University of Khartoum under the direction of Professor Ali Osman, see Edwards (internet site).

      The name Taajáab is of uncertain etymology. No meaning for it was given by the local population. It could have originated either in the local Nubian language (Nobíin), or in Arabic or even in an ancient language no longer spoken in the area. The final element – áab could be a familiar suffix indicating a 'kinship group'. It is widely attested in the northern Sudan, cf. Majaráab 'the family of Magyars' who trace their origins back to Hungarian troops settled in Nubia during the Ottoman period, Qasim (1966), 5: 2104. However, no such explanation was offered by the local inhabitants for Taajáab. It is now the name of a shaikhdom, or traditional administrative unit, including several hamlets along the river bank.

      The name Taajáab was elicited in the local Nubian language (Nobíin) and is spelled according to the rules of that language. The medial consonant stands for an affricate /j/ pronounced [dj] as in the English word 'jungle', [cf. German *dsch* as in *Dschungel*]. The doubling of the vowel represents vowel length [aa = long a]. The acute accent on the second syllable indicates that it has a high tone [high pitch] contrasting with a low tone on the initial syllable. The Nubian languages are tone languages like the vast majority of African languages. Standard Arabic does not make regular use of pitch, or musical tone, as a distinctive feature.

      Apart from not showing high tone, the Arabic writing system can represent this name with precision. There are no non-Arabic vowels or consonants. The name is published accurately in Arabic letters by Qasim (1996), 1:362.

      On the other hand, this name is published incorrectly with a /q/ rather than a /j/ on the maps of the Sudan Survey Department (1983). The English map has 'Taqab' and the corresponding Arabic map has the Arabic equivalent of 'Taqaab' (with the letter *alif* showing vowel length in the second syllable).

Four Competing Solutions for Representing /g/ in Arabic Characters:

      The incorrect /q/ has a curious explanation. It results from the fact that there is no unambiguous way in Arabic to represent a hard /g/ (velar plosive) as in 'Glasgow'. There are different solutions to this problem in Egypt and the Sudan as a result of the influence of colloquial Egyptian Arabic and colloquial Sudanese Arabic respectively. (1) The most prominent dialects of colloquial **Egyptian** Arabic pronounce a hard /g/ corresponding to a written /**j**/ (fricative or affricate) in cognate words in Standard Arabic. (2) On the other hand, the most prominent dialects of colloquial **Sudanese** Arabic pronounce a hard /g/ corresponding to a written /**q**/ (uvular plosive) in cognate words in Standard Arabic. Therefore, Egyptians and Sudanese tend to use the Standard Arabic letters /j/ and /q/ respectively to represent the hard /g/. (3) The practice adopted by the United Nations for country names introduces a third solution in a move towards international standardization, United Nations (1997). They use the Standard Arabic letter /gh/ (velar fricative) to represent the hard /g/ (velar plosive). Thus, there are three solutions in competition with each other, (1) /g/ written as /j/, (2) /g/ written as /q/ and (3) /g/ written as /gh/. Each of these solutions blurs the distinction between the velar plosive /g/ and a different sound represented by a character in Standard Arabic. These characters are therefore all potentially ambiguous. (4) A fourth solution was adopted for the Farsi language in ancient times. It was simply to create an unambiguous letter modeled on the Arabic *k (kaaf)* with an extra stroke on top in order to represent /g/.

How could the ambiguous solutions (1) and (2) have led to the incorrect spelling 'Taqab'? The following explanation is one of several possible scenarios. The name could have been correctly written in the field as Taa**j**áab, but later interpreted from the Egyptian point of view as being pronounced *Taa**g**áab. If Sudanese cartographers had subsequently been convinced by the Egyptian interpretation, they would have accepted that the name was pronounced *Taa**g**áab, but preferred that it should be written with a /q/ in a fashion more appropriate in the Sudan (*****Taa**q**áab, further reduced to 'Taqab'). Recently, when the pronunciation of this name was checked again with local inhabitants, the mistake was identified and rectified.

The /g/ phenomenon is only one of many features requiring attention. Multiple and competing solutions for a wide range of other sounds need to be investigated as well. The solutions for /ng/ as in 'si**ng**er' are related to the /g/ phenomenon and have high priority as the next feature to be investigated.

Since the Nubian homelands lie in Egypt as well as the Sudan, they are strongly exposed to influences from both directions. With the continuing growth of a Nubian diaspora in the Arab world and the West, they may also become more exposed to international solutions such as the system adopted by the United Nations for country names, United Nations (1997).

Conclusion:
There is an urgent need for a standard approach to the application of the Arabic writing system to non-Arabic sounds. However, the competing conventions of Egypt and the Sudan are firmly established. Perhaps the most practical solution is to encourage each country to define its conventions more precisely in line with national standardization, see Kadmon (2000), 189 f. If so, the Sudanese conventions might well be based initially on the authoritative work of Qasim (1996), see also his dictionary of colloquial Sudanese Arabic (1972, with a new edition forthcoming).

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