

The More Things Change: A Learner's Perspective on Learning Another Arabic Dialect

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Abstract

This study considers the process of learning another Arabic dialect from a learner's point of view. It is based on a language-learning journal written during the study of Maltese in the summer of 2009. This study considers the context of learning as well as situational and affective factors that aided or impeded it. Its focus, however, is on the learning process itself and on the three steps or stages identified in that process; this is a qualitative rather than quantitative study. Based on these stages, the study proposes questions for further research, experimental and/or empirical, to shed light on the process often described as "easy." It also makes suggestions for Arabic language instructors and administrators of programs in which Arabic dialects are taught or learned, suggestions to better prepare students to learn an Arabic dialect effectively.

Introduction

The teaching of Arabic, a diglossic language, poses certain challenges. One of these is the teaching of vernacular Arabic. Opinions are divided as to whether a non-standard and non-standardized variety of spoken Arabic (an Arabic dialect) should be taught in the classroom at all.¹ A common objection to the teaching of Arabic dialects is the difficulty of choosing which dialect to teach. The argument is that a student who studies the Arabic dialect of one country

¹ The discussion of the teaching of Arabic vernaculars is a long-standing one in the United States. McCarus (1992) describes the teaching of Arabic dialects that began in the years that followed World War II. More recent contributions to this discussion can be dated to the early 1990s, when articles by Ryding (1991) and Al-Batal (1992) discussed new approaches to teaching dialects in the classroom.

could go on to study, conduct research, or work in another country, a country where a very different dialect of Arabic is the norm. In that case, the student will need to learn a second dialect, the dialect of the destination country, in order to communicate. Al-Batal and Belnap (2006) respond that the choice of dialect is not so crucial:

The argument presumes that learning a second dialect presents a major challenge for learners. Experience has shown that students can move readily from learning one dialect to another. The transition from Egyptian to Levantine (or vice versa) is particularly easy and some exposure to both of these varieties is a significant plus. (p. 396)

Both the argument and the response to it by Al-Batal and Belnap are based on observation and experience. Students, through careful planning or happy accident, often end up in a country whose dialect they have not studied and yet develop a level of proficiency in that dialect. There is, however, almost no published research about the process of learning a first dialect of Arabic, let alone a second one.

This study considers the process of learning another Arabic dialect from a learner's point of view. It is based on a language learning journal written during my study of Maltese in the summer of 2009. This study considers the context of learning as well as situational and affective factors that aided or impeded learning. Its focus, however, is on the learning process itself and on the steps or stages identified in my process. Based on these stages, the study proposes questions for further research, experimental and/or empirical, to shed light on the process that so many describe as "easy." It also makes suggestions for Arabic language instructors and administrators of programs in which Arabic dialects are taught or learned, suggestions to better prepare students to learn an Arabic dialect effectively.

Diglossia in Arabic

Arabic is one of the four languages cited by Ferguson (1959) in a seminal article on diglossia (the others are Greek, Swiss German, and Haitian Creole). In this article, he identified Classical Arabic as the High (H) variety of Arabic, used in formal, religious, and institu-

tional settings, and as the written variety of Arabic. At the same time, he described colloquial or vernacular Arabic, the Arabic dialects, as the Low (L) variety, used in daily life and informal settings, and seldom written. The two language varieties, H and L, or Classical Arabic and colloquial Arabic, exist side-by-side in society, each with a role to play. In the years since, Ferguson and numerous other authors have re-examined the original definition of diglossia to develop a more nuanced picture of Arabic in use. Hary (1996) introduced the metaphor of the continuum to analysis of Arabic. . Rather than two distinct and separate language varieties, he views Arabic as a continuum with Classical Arabic (or Qur'anic Arabic) or Modern Standard Arabic (MSA, a variety of contemporary, standardized Arabic based on but not identical with Classical Arabic) at one end and vernacular Arabic at the other. Holes (2004) expands on the metaphor:

[T]he behavior of most Arabic speakers, educated or not, is rather one of constant style shifting along a cline at opposite ends of which are “pure” MSA and the “pure” regional dialect, more accurately conceived of as idealized constructs than real entities (p. 49).

The metaphor of the continuum helps teachers and researchers conceptualize Arabic language use. It also makes it clear that, to function effectively in Arabic-speaking societies, one must know both MSA and an Arabic dialect.

Students of Arabic, however, see the situation rather differently. They tend to see reaching proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic and an Arabic dialect as requiring them to master two languages rather than two varieties of a single language. Learning MSA, with its right-to-left script, Semitic root and pattern morphology, and lack of cognate vocabulary, is already complex. Even the most dedicated student understandably finds the additional task of studying a dialect daunting. Adding a second dialect to the mix only adds insult to injury. In many cases, however, proficiency in another dialect is a necessity.

Arabic dialects from Mauritania to Oman are united by shared linguistic features (Ferguson, 1959; Bateson, 1967; Nydell, 1994; Versteegh, 1997, among others) and by the cultural conviction that the Arab world is a linguistic whole. Other linguistic features,

those that are not shared, combine with regional variation in the lexicon and define dialects as Egyptian, Moroccan, or Iraqi. These linguistic differences can make communication difficult between speakers of dialects that are separated by geography or history, whether they are native speakers of Arabic or students of the language.

The learner

McKay (2006) points out that most published diary studies are the work of “linguists, experienced language teachers, or language teachers in training. Because of this, they may not be representative of typical language learners” (p. 68).” Admittedly, my experience is not representative either of language learners in general or of students of an Arabic dialect. My study of Modern Standard Arabic began when I was an undergraduate. Before the first semester ended, I decided to major in Arabic. My introduction to an Arabic dialect came in my second year of Arabic language study. Since that time, my studies, research, and work experience have exposed me to other dialects of Arabic.

The dialects I have studied are listed in chronological order below with a brief description of teaching or learning methods and results. Results are qualitative rather than quantitative; oral proficiency testing in Arabic was in its early stages during my graduate studies.

- Egyptian Arabic (a): one year of intensive (10 hours/week) classroom study in the US. My memories of this course, a degree requirement for Arabic majors, are hazy. My undergraduate transcript indicates grades of A in the fall semester and B+ in the spring.
- Urban Palestinian/Jordanian Arabic: two years of immersion learning in Amman with no formal instruction in the dialect. I saw myself as a fluent Arabic speaker at the end of this period. In retrospect, gaps in my knowledge and performance suggest that I left Jordan with a proficiency rating of ACTFL Advanced or ILR 2. This dialect is still my “base dialect,” the one in which I feel most comfortable speaking and a continu-

ing source of interference when I speak other Arabic dialects.

- Egyptian Arabic (b): one year of classroom instruction and immersion learning in Cairo. My transition from Urban Jordanian/Palestinian Arabic to Egyptian Arabic was easier than learning Urban Jordanian/Palestinian, as this transition built on a firmer linguistic base. High-quality classroom instruction at the Center for Advanced Proficiency in Arabic (CASA) at the American University in Cairo contributed significantly to the transition. My understanding of dialect differences in Arabic was limited, however, and I (wrongly) assumed that they were largely a matter of “accent,” as they would be in American English. It was only after an instructor explained that my Arabic was often incomprehensible to Egyptians that I put serious effort into learning Egyptian Arabic.
- Moroccan Arabic: one year of private instruction and immersion learning during dissertation research in Rabat. There was no question in Morocco that I needed to function in Moroccan Arabic; dialect differences were too great to ignore. The transition to Moroccan Arabic was complicated by the need to use French in professional and social settings, although my knowledge of French was limited. By the end of three months, I could function effectively in Moroccan Arabic. My usage was not always consistent, as other Arabic dialects interfered without careful monitoring.
- Sudanese Arabic: 18 months of research based on audio recordings, written references, and consultations with speakers of Sudanese Arabic. The end product of this research was *Spoken Sudanese Arabic: Grammar, Dialogues, and Glossary* (Bergman, 2002). Although oral comprehension and knowledge of the linguistic features of Sudanese Arabic were the goals of my research, I was cheered to hear from a Sudanese colleague that I was “on my way” to speaking Sudanese Arabic.
 - Iraqi Arabic: intermittent research over approximately one year, based on audio recordings, written references, and consultations with speakers of Iraqi Arabic. This resulted in

Sketch Grammar of Spoken Iraqi Arabic (Bergman & Dickinson, 2005). In this case, too, I have oral comprehension and knowledge of linguistic features, with limited ability to speak Iraqi Arabic.

- Algerian Arabic: two years of research based on audio recordings, written references, and consultations with speakers of Algerian Arabic. This resulted in *Spoken Algerian Arabic* (Bergman, 2005). One might assume that the transition from Moroccan Arabic to Algerian Arabic would be relatively simple, given the minimal geographic and linguistic distance between these two varieties. Perhaps because of this assumption or because of the large amounts of regional variation described in the work, even a transition that involved oral comprehension and knowledge of linguistic features was not easy for me.

Although Bailey (1983) recommends that the diarist provide an account of her/his language learning history, what appears above is my history of learning Arabic dialects, most relevant to the present study. In addition to the Arabic dialects listed above, I have working proficiency in spoken and written French and reading knowledge of German, Italian, and Spanish. The Turkish I studied in graduate school is, unfortunately, rusty from lack of use.

The chronology provided above suggests that I am an experienced student of Arabic dialects and of languages. Please note that it says nothing about aptitude. Studying another dialect or another language is difficult and time consuming for me; much of the work involved is tedious. And using a new dialect is full of pitfalls, from language errors to social gaffes. What makes learning possible is a high degree of motivation. I typically have a concrete goal for learning: pass the class, complete the dissertation, write the book, etc. At the same time, I want to communicate with people in the target speech community and fit in, to the extent that this is possible. Motivation has led me to rely on a variety of strategies and techniques in the learning process. These are discussed below.

The target language

Maltese speakers consider their language to be a language in its own right (Mifsud, 2007), not a derivative of Arabic. Arabic speakers generally agree that Maltese is “not Arabic.”² Maltese gained international recognition as national language in 2004, when it became one of the 20 official languages of the European Union. Nonetheless, researchers on Arabic vernaculars consider Maltese to be a dialect of Arabic, although they treat it as peripheral (see Kaye and Rosenhouse, 1997; Veersteegh, 1997). Opinions on the origins of Maltese are divided (for a summary, see Brincat, 2007). There is good historical evidence, however, that Arabic was well established in Malta by the time of the Norman conquest in 1091, and that the use of Arabic in Malta continued until the expulsion of the Muslims in 1224 and 1249 (Brincat, 2007). At this point, Maltese began to diverge from other Arabic dialects. Contact with Classical Arabic was lost, and Maltese took on a large number of loanwords from European languages, primarily Italian and English. The results of Maltese linguistic history are striking even visually, as Maltese is written in Latin script.

Linguistically, Maltese is equally striking. The phonemic inventory of Maltese is closer to those of European languages than to contemporary Arabic. As compared with MSA, Maltese lacks 11 consonantal phonemes, lost through mergers with other phonemes. These 11 consonants are the most distinctive sounds of Arabic: the emphatic or pharyngealized consonants, the velar and pharyngeal fricatives, and the uvular stop. Only the pharyngeal fricative /ħ/ is still heard, while the glottal stop /ʔ/ survives as a reflex of the Arabic uvular stop /q/. These sounds were not replaced, but Maltese has borrowed seven additional consonants from contact languages: /p/, /t/, /ts/, /dz/, /tʃ/, /v/, and /ʒ/ (see Mifsud, 2007). The lexicon of Maltese is also noteworthy. Words of Arabic origin make up some 32% of the items in Acquilina’s *Maltese-English Dictionary*; the rest come from Sicilian, Italian, and English. Other Arabic dialects also

² Significant cultural contact with the Arabic-speaking world and the Arab and Islamic literary and cultural heritage ended with the expulsion of Muslims from Malta in 1224 (Brincat, 2007).

have reduced consonantal inventories, when compared with Classical Arabic and MSA; they borrow words from foreign languages, too. It is the amount rather than the type of change to phonology and lexicon that is noteworthy in Maltese.

Dramatic change in Maltese has occurred in morphology. Mifsud (2007) summarizes this change:

[T]he root-based Arabic morphology of Maltese could not continue to cope with the full integration (i.e. *taʿrib*) of Romance loans and eventually gave way to a hybridized schema of the stem-based type, incorporating both flexible elements of the native morphology and new features contracted from Sicilian and Italian (Mifsud, 1995b). The morphology of Maltese is presently undergoing a slow but major typological shift from the Arabic root-centered structure to a more open concatenative morphology of the European type (p. 5).

This morphological change gives Maltese the flexibility to continuing borrowing from European languages. A learner who comes to Maltese from other dialects of Arabic, however, may find it disconcerting. Morphology and syntax are the categories that undergo the least change in other Arabic dialects. They may be said to form the core of what is perceived to be truly “Arabic.”

It should be noted that Maltese is not the only language in use in Malta. Brincat (2009) cites figures from the 1995 census: “out of a population of 324,386 persons aged sixteen and over, 317,311 speak Maltese, 246,157 learned English well” (p. 4). English words and phrases are common in Maltese speech and signage. Some borrowings, such as *lift* ‘elevator’, pass into Maltese without alteration, while others, such as *tim* ‘team’ are re-written according to Maltese orthographic rules.

The context of learning

I had learned something about Maltese through my research, but the opportunity to study it came in spring 2009, when the Institute of Linguistics and the Department of Maltese at the University of Malta announced the Summer School in Maltese Linguistics. Organized through the Foundation for International Studies, it was to take place at the Old University campus in Valletta in summer 2009. The program complemented my research interests in the comparative study of Arabic dialects. In addition, the announcement indicated that an optional course in Maltese for adults would be offered, offering me exposure to another dialect of Arabic. With support from the College of Arts and Sciences at Miami University of Ohio, I enrolled in the Summer School and the optional course in Maltese.

The Maltese course was attended by three of the six participants in the Summer School. One, whom I will call B, knows Arabic but had minimal previous exposure to Maltese. The other, N, has considerable knowledge of Maltese from his research and from prior visits to the island, but no knowledge of Arabic. Both of the other students of Maltese are male and were at the dissertation stage of their graduate studies. The instructor T, a male Maltese national, has considerable experience teaching Maltese to adult learners. He is also the author of a textbook series.

The Maltese language course met in on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings for two hours per session, a total of 12 contact hours. Course materials were adapted from the *Sisien* adult literacy series, *Sisien: Inbaddmu Lsienna 'The Foundation: we use our language'* (Muscat, 2006) and the accompanying workbook *Sisien: nitharrġu fi lseinna 'The Foundation: we are trained in our language'* (Muscat, 2007). Classes met in a seminar room from 5.00 to 7.00 p.m. Language classes, thus, followed a full day of lectures or workshops in the Summer School. Our instructor T maintained a high level of energy through each session, and we often stayed late to continue discussion or cover one last point. Enthusiasm and energy, however, could not always compensate for the long days.

T came to our first class with a well-planned syllabus that mapped out a topic for each class session. These were introductions and identification, friends and family, description of hometown or

home city, the home, and countries of origin. Activities to take place during each session were speaking and listening, reading comprehension, grammar and orthography, writing, vocabulary, and socio-cultural aspects of Maltese. T's teaching is a conventional, teacher-centered style in which he maintains the pace and subject matter of the class. At least, that was his initial approach. When, as discussed below, his students attempted to impose their personal agendas, he was remarkably generous in sharing his knowledge of Maltese and his love of the language.

My Learning Process Stage One: Establishing Baselinesā

The start of my trip to Malta was auspicious. Seated immediately behind me on the flight to Frankfurt was a group of American students of Arabic bound for a summer study program in the Middle East. The journal reminds me that they were “[f]ull of what they’d learned in Arabic class this year and plans to ‘pick up *Šāmmiyya* (the local Arabic dialect)’ by ‘talking to the people.’” I felt rather smug, not realizing that my plans for studying Maltese were more concrete than my preparation had been. To be fair, I had moved to a new home three weeks before my departure. A copy of *Teach Yourself Maltese* (Acquilina, 1965) had been carefully set aside for the trip with a Maltese phrasebook, but I had not spent much time with either. The move also distracted me from investigating other resources, such as textbooks and reference grammars.

My learning began almost as soon as the plane touched down in Valletta. My first journal entry, written on the evening of my arrival, notes: “Language – so far – is mystifying. I can pick up a word or two, but it’s no clearer at this point than Turkish was [on my first visit to Turkey]. I can read a bit, at least.” Language classes began the following day, when our instructor T picked up B, N, and me for the drive to the University of Malta campus. It was a promising start: “The two-hour lesson began in the car. If adrenalin ensures learning, I’m right there. T drives well but aggressively – and on the left, of course. Good teacher, clearly testing us. He kept throwing material at us in the car to find our limits.”

On Day Two of the two-week program, I began to identify my own limits at different levels of the language. I found the phono-

logical system of Maltese mystifying: “How could they [the Maltese] have lost /q/ and the pharyngeals?” Lexicon was a frequent challenge:

Arabic borrowings in Maltese are much clearer than in Turkish, for example. But just when I feel that this is familiar, an Italian borrowing or unexpected Arabic usage (*tʃajla* ‘young woman’ vs. *tifla* ‘young girl’) takes me by surprise.”³

Other linguistic features of Maltese were easier to understand. Morphology, in general, “makes a lot of sense to an Arabist.” Some aspects of the socio-cultural context were recognizable: “Knowledge of Arabic and/or Mediterranean culture lets me predict some usages, like responses that are required for some social formulae.” Attempts to use nearly acquired language were depressingly familiar: “I tried using a socially appropriate response, *qalbak tajba* ‘you are too kind’. And got that look that says, ‘huh?’ So what’s up with *qalb* as grammatically feminine?” This entry is followed in the journal with a subdued “Note to self: *qalba tayba* is the correct form.”

By Day Three, the novelty of a new place, new people, and a new language began to wear thin. Journal entries for that day express frustration as well with a certain perspective on my situation: “I feel pressed to understand and master it all in two weeks, even knowing that three months is my minimum for mainstream Arabic dialects. Not possible, this is completely clear to me, and still annoying.” At the same time, I realized that putting my knowledge of Maltese into practice would not be easy in a largely bilingual society:

The Maltese I meet are language professionals and service workers and so at home to a large extent in English. Their automatic response to me is English. Though, to be honest, I haven’t exactly pushed the envelope on language use – in three days? It will take more time and a less-touristy environment.”

³ The surprise here results from comparison with Arabic. *Tʃajla* ‘young woman’ looks like an Arabic diminutive derived from *tifla* ‘girl’. Maltese usage is the reverse of what Arabic morphology would lead one to expect.

My ability to see a larger picture and to look beyond the language itself, suggests that a shift in my learning process was imminent.

My Learning Process Stage Two: Finding the Way

The next stage began on Day Four, with a visit with N to a bookshop. We each bought a portable Maltese-English dictionary and looked over academic language reference works, wondering what budget and baggage allowance would handle. Mostly, however, I looked longingly at other Maltese language publications: “Real books, how nice. The only Maltese I’ve read since getting here is signage, citations in lectures, and Maltese homework. Wonder how long it will take?” The answer to that question came soon enough.

Day Five, Friday of the first week of the Summer School, pointed me toward finding my way through the language learning process. It came in a lecture on Maltese in the media, when I heard a name and description that sounded familiar. The name was Ġahan, the Maltese counterpart of Juha, the wise fool of Arabic folklore. He gave his name to the first Maltese newspaper, published in 1848. The following day, I headed to the National Library with my dictionary to look into this character and his newspaper. It seemed an unlikely goal, but worth a try. The journal describes the result:

“I can read! Slow, yes. Not unlike my reading in Italian. But I can do it. And Ġahan is amazing. And the nice gentlemen in the National Library – I knew I’d hit the jackpot when the senior fellow looked up from his newspaper to say, “I learned to read with Ġahan.”

I left the library with a stack of notes and a new sense of purpose. My ability to use Maltese for research galvanized me.

Another excursion on Sunday took me out of Valletta to explore a traditional fishing village and another path to my language learning. I spent the day riding Malta’s good public bus system, strolling through a large public market, and lunching on the waterfront. Nowhere in Malta is entirely free of tourists in early summer, but the people I encountered that day were not as ready as the other Maltese I had met to use English. In its own way, this day was another suc-

cess:

I was able use bits of Maltese, much to the amusement/pleasure/puzzlement of the people I met....
OK, I am not a speaker of Maltese, but I can make the language work for me.

The two-day break and my success at using language for my goals as well as social interaction left me rested and refreshed. My mood on Sunday evening was upbeat: "Next week, who knows? Anything can happen."

My Learning Process Stage Three: Pulling It Together

While I was finding a path and purposes for my language learning process, other participants in the Summer School were going through their own changes. The formal distance and discourse that characterized the first week disappeared. The format of presentations shifted from lecture to discussion. Three student volunteers, remarkable undergraduates with interests in Maltese linguistics, joined us to talk about their research. Their contributions to discussion were frequent and enthusiastic. Discussion often continued through lunch at a nearby restaurant. The individuals involved in the Summer School, participants from several countries and languages, with the program organizers and lecturers, began to form a temporary but cohesive group.

In the meantime, other changes were in the wind. During the first week, there had been some disconnect between T's teaching style and the learning styles of his students. My journal entry describes my ambivalence toward the situation:

Language teachers make bad language students, just like doctors are the worst patients. I think T is not comfortable with our questions. Or with our discussions among ourselves. It's taking control of the class out of his hands, but how not to ask? Especially with B and N, who make good points.

Although T sometimes seemed uncomfortable in the first week when we asked questions unrelated to the matter at hand, he was never impatient. He answered our questions in full, then moved

smoothly back to his lesson plan. As of Day Five, he began to relax, and my language class notes are much longer and more detailed from that point. They include verb conjugations, collocations (*m'ghandix biżonnu* 'I don't need it'), a list of reduplicative adverbials (such as *baxx baxx* 'secretly' and *pass pass* 'slowly'), and other useful expressions (*dażgur* 'of course'). In the second week, everyone was noticeably more relaxed in language classes. It seemed that T enjoyed our questions as much as we appreciated his responses.

My newfound literacy in Maltese expanded after a lecture devoted to Maltese literature on Day Six. Works discussed ranged from classics of Maltese literature to the latest publications. With the help of my lecture notes, I purchased several novels and collections of short stories. The journal records my reaction to a particularly troubling story of family dysfunction and notes another development in my language use: "Oof. That was nasty. But at least the process was enjoyable. Nice to be able to read for pleasure. Sort of." The signs of developing literary taste only enhanced the experience of reading in a new language.

Days Seven through Ten passed too quickly. My journal for these days describes my continuing search for an ideal resource for learning Maltese:

I still wish I'd been able to find a good phrasebook – my kind of phrasebook. Maybe it doesn't exist for Maltese? Maybe not for any language? Anyway, it would have lots of formulaic politeness expressions ..., the kind of thing that got me through the early days in Jordan and Morocco. Please, thank you, you're too kind. Can't talk like everyone around you? At least be charming. And it lets me feel as though I have some functional language ability, even if minimal.

The journal also notes plans for two research projects that await my return to Malta and my explorations of Maltese pastries. Day Ten was a whirlwind of farewells in our little group. T presented us with a generous supply of Maltese language materials so that we could continue our studies. One of these, a startlingly colorful poster of human anatomy to illustrate the names of parts of the body, hangs above my desk as I type. It is a fitting metaphor for the process of writing this article.

My Learning Process: An Overview

Before consideration of my learning process, some caveats are in order. I am not a typical language learner, Maltese is a peripheral Arabic dialect, and the time frame of my classroom study of Maltese is far shorter than even most intensive summer study programs in the Arab world. These facts limit the validity of generalizations I might make. At the same time, however, arguments about teaching Arabic dialects in the classroom continue against a backdrop of little or no published research. The present study, an examination of learning another Arabic dialect from the inside, is a start. It may provide impetus for future research.

If certain elements of my experience of studying Maltese are atypical for students of Arabic, other elements offset them. The knowledge and experience that I brought to Maltese, for example, was countered by the limited time I spent there. The two-week program asked me to cram what I could into that period and omit the rest, not unlike what I see in students after a summer in the Arab world. Let us not forget that most students of Arabic study in the Arab world for brief periods – a summer or a semester rather than even a ten-month academic year. As for my previous knowledge of Arabic, Maltese took me as far outside of my intellectual comfort zone as a new Arabic dialect takes less mature students. In other words, what is described here may give us an idea of what other Arabic students go through.

The process described here was not something I was conscious of while it took place. Before writing, revising, and analyzing the journal, I was of course aware of certain patterns in my learning experience. These patterns clarified as I re-read the journal after my return to the US. They reveal that, at least in the start of studying another Arabic dialect, my process has three steps or phases.

The first stage, establishing baselines, consists of triangulating data. Throughout this stage, I compare the new linguistic information that comes in from the environment to my assumptions about language and environment, as well as to my prior knowledge. I constantly make and test hypotheses. Those that seem accurate are retained; others are revised for further testing or discarded. As my journal entries indicate, this stage is challenging and often frustrating. It seems,

however, to be necessary to the process. Examining and re-examining data does not, of course, stop when my learning moves into the second phrase. Instead, it retreats to the background as I focus on the work of the next phase or phases.

The second stage, finding the way, allows me to incorporate the linguistic baseline established in the first stage with my other interests and concerns. It provides me with a compelling personal motivation -- other than strong desires to carry out research or day-to-day communication -- for the hard work of language learning. In the case of Maltese, my reason was reading contemporary literature for pleasure. Other places and other times in my life have offered different paths. In Morocco, for example, I explored the local cuisine to cook fish, meats, and vegetables in ways that I had never imagined. Egypt, in contrast, gave me an opportunity to learn about the Arabic grammatical heritage. The search for a personal path appears to begin early in the process, probably during the baseline stage. As I struggle to integrate new and existing knowledge, I am also working to fit my personal experiences and preferences into the new social and cultural context. That would explain the eureka moment I experienced when I began reading.

The third stage, pulling it together, is when the work really begins. Armed with baseline knowledge of the dialect and motivation for continuing to study, I settle in for the long haul. I note that the journal does not record long evenings spent reading, making vocabulary lists, and checking details of morphology and syntax in the second week of the Summer School. These evenings were satisfying and productive. Why did I not describe them? Probably because I take them for granted. In many ways, settling in to work is the short-term goal of my learning process.

Questions for Further Research

A first question for further research is, what happens next? That is, if my learning process were to continue in the same focused way that it began in Malta, would I embark on another stage in that process? This is likely, but it is difficult to see what form that stage might take. Like the research I planned in Malta, this question will have to wait for my return to Malta.

Other possible research questions would focus on comparison rather than continuation. One avenue for comparison is obvious. My description of the learning process is highly subjective. Investigating how my description accords (or not) with research on the process of learning another language or language variety that is more or less closely related to the first. Another possibility would question the extent to which my learning process is, in fact, a process. It is possible that what I describe is instead a series of language learning strategies that have become internalized over time. It would be useful to consider my description of the process in the light of the research on language learning strategies. Of most relevance, however, would be an investigation of a larger group of students learning a dialect of Arabic. Expanding the scope of the current study might reveal whether the process I describe is idiosyncratic, the product of my previous dialect learning experience, or has more general application. Such a study would also do much to enhance our understanding of how students learn an Arabic dialect.

Suggestions

With the exception of the few institutions in the US where the teaching of Arabic dialects is integrated into the Arabic language curriculum, students are in general poorly prepared to learn an Arabic dialect. They often reach their destination country with little knowledge of the linguistic features of that country's dialect(s), only a hazy understanding of the role that Arabic dialects play in the sociolinguistic setting, and minimal awareness of what learning a dialect requires.

Students and the programs to which they are sent would both benefit if students went through a brief dialect familiarization course before they left the US. This could take the form of a more or less detailed comparison between MSA and the dialect of their destination. Ideally, it would point out the regular and systematic phonological differences they will hear – differences that are predictable -- as well as the most salient dialect-specific vocabulary items in daily use, which are not predictable. At the very least, students would also learn basic courtesy expressions in the destination dialect. A familiarization course would eliminate some of the stress students currently experience when they reach their destination and discover that the re-

sponse to the MSA they speak, appropriate in a classroom but not in Arab society, is met with stares and snickers.

Once students reach their destination, they should be allowed and even encouraged to pursue personal interests and given the resources they need to do so. Arabic study abroad programs are typically intensive. With four or more contact hours per day, they leave student little time or energy to engage in activities other than language study. Encouraging students to pursue personal interests outside the classroom may cut into the time that they spend in the classroom. My learning process, however, suggests that this would be only a short-term loss. The payoff in the long term is greater motivation and increased proficiency that could result from empowering students to learn for personal as well as academic or professional goals.

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