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Forced Migration and Refugees Studies Working Paper No. 3

**INITIAL OVERVIEW OF THE LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY
OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES IN CAIRO
2003**

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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
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ABSTRACT

Cairo has become home to a high number of refugees, who – no matter how long they stay in the Egyptian capital – are very likely to remain as part of distinct immigrant communities. Their members' country of origin, cultural and language background form the basis of cohesion. Their presence contributes to making Cairo linguistically dynamic. Since the significance of this has so far been greatly underestimated, there is need for research on language diversity in Cairo.

This report partially fulfils this need, in that it begins to highlight the diversity of languages spoken by refugees in Cairo and alerts those who provide services to refugees how complicated is the process of interpretation of both language and culture. It includes a general analysis of language use, maintenance, and shift. The social and cultural dimension of language interpretation into English is also considered. General conclusions on communication through an interpreter are offered, particularly with reference to the necessity of training community interpreters. Another aim of the research is to provide a stimulus to other researchers to conducting further studies in order to contribute to filling the lacunae in socio-linguistic studies.

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I - INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this research is to begin to highlight the diversity of languages spoken by refugees in Cairo and to alert those who provide services to refugees to the complexity of the process of interpretation of both language and culture. Another aim of the research is to provide a stimulus to other researchers to conducting further studies in order to contribute to filling the lacuna in socio-linguistic studies.

This report identifies a number of language communities in Cairo. It focuses on the languages spoken by the refugees interviewed. It includes a general analysis of language use, maintenance, and shift.¹ The social and cultural dimension of language interpretation into English is also considered. General conclusions on communication through an interpreter are offered, particularly with reference to the necessity of training community interpreters.

Focus

The contexts in which the data for this report were collected were both forced displacement and urbanization. The influence of urbanization without access to learning the mainstream language, Arabic, means that the use of mother tongue languages² is constantly in flux with the newcomer consciously or unconsciously adopting aspects of Arabic. The relationship between ethnic grouping and language use is however complicated. For example, the case of a Mandingo person, raised in Via country in Liberia and transferred to Monrovia for his education at the age of eight, was reported: he was apparently unable to speak his ‘mother tongue’.³

Motivation

Although a comprehensive study of linguistic variation of each nationality was beyond the scope of this research, we are providing information that should alert service providers and those who determine refugee status to the complexities that heretofore have been ignored.

In order to prevent language and cultural unawareness from negatively affecting the refugee status determination process, service providers in Cairo should consider that lack of communication may understandably result into inaccurate information, upon which decisions may have to be taken. Therefore, the necessary steps to achieve understanding of both language diversity in Cairo and the communication process which occurs during communication through an interpreter should urgently be taken.

¹ Technical terms are defined in Appendix I.

² Throughout this report, the expression ‘mother tongue’ stands for ‘mother tongue or equivalent’, that is, the dominant language spoken from an early age.

³ He was only very briefly exposed to this language.

Methodology

The conclusions of this study must be considered very preliminary, as it was more of a ‘feasibility study’ than a comprehensive exploration of the topic under investigation. The method used in this study was entirely empirical, due to the absence of substantial literature on the subject. Informants from the following nationalities within the refugee population were interviewed: Sudanese (160), Somali (60), Ethiopian (40), Eritrean (30), Burundian (15), and Sierra Leonian (15). I also conducted focus group discussions with the different nationalities, permitting them to discuss and arrive at a consensus vis-à-vis certain words and issues. I also asked refugees to comment on their experiences with different service providers in Cairo.

The following organizations were called on to seek their co-operation in addressing the multitude of problems of miscommunication due to unawareness of language diversity: UNHCR, EOHR’s Refugee Legal Aid, CARITAS, All Saints Church, Sacred Heart Church, St Andrew’s Church, and the Canadian Embassy.

Information was also collected on refugees’ knowledge of Arabic on their arrival. In this regard, it was relevant to discuss with the refugees interviewed how they coped with the Egyptian linguistic reality at the time and as their stay in Egypt was extended.

Some insights gained in the process of data collection

At the beginning, most refugees tended to give the same name for both tribe and language.⁴ It had to be assumed, although it could not be verified, that there was a possible discrepancy between the information given by the interviewees and their actual language skills.⁵ Due to limitation of funding and time, no speech-samples were collected during the data collection. Therefore, it was not possible to compare two different speakers (in terms of – for instance – social and educational background) belonging to the same group. As a consequence, conclusions on elements such as pronunciation, accent, vocabulary range, and borrowing, that might differ between the educated and the illiterate, those who came from rural and urban areas and so on, could not be drawn.

It was assumed that the information given by interviewees may be linked to the symbolic value and status of the language(s) mentioned, although not necessarily

⁴ This turned out to be particularly problematic when interviewing Sudanese refugees, as they would often think of their dialect as a separated language, whereas it would belong to a language group they were not aware of. Comparison with any available classification of African languages was not always helpful.

⁵ Such discrepancy might have occurred for the following reasons: interviewees did not mention one language they speak simply because they consider it as a local dialect of no importance; they did not mention one language they speak because they intend to withhold information on their actual ethnic origin; they did not mention one language they speak because they prefer to mention only the language they have acquired at a later stage through intermarriage; they claimed to speak one language, even though they do not, because they are afraid of having lost their identity; they claimed that one language is their mother tongue, although it is not, because it is a language of prestige in the country / region where they used to live.

with fluency. In this respect, it should be noticed that

- 70% of the interviewees justified their claim to speak a particular language by stating that it is their ethnic group's language or it is the language of their community;⁶
- 30% of the interviewees justified their claim to speak a particular language by declaring that it is the language they learned first;⁷ and
- 10% of the interviewees defined their position as linguistically non-Arab, stating that their language is much easier and more beautiful than Arabic, which they tend to despise.⁸

The need to make methodological distinction between adults, children, teenagers, and women, as well as between those who did or did not grow up in Cairo would have also been desirable. In addition, Cairo's refugees do not live in camps, they are urban refugees. This contributes to their "invisibility", that is, it complicates the data collection process. Particularly, it was not always possible to target interviewees according to their background, be it social, economic, or educational. For these reasons, it is impossible to include a comprehensive account for every single language community investigated.

II – COUNTRY STUDIES

This report is divided into sections according to the countries where the languages considered are spoken. It begins with the largest and most linguistically complex nation represented in Cairo, Sudan, and includes less complex cases, such as Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Burundi, and Sierra Leone. Each section includes general information on the language(s) mentioned by the interviewees, and a brief analysis of their use in Cairo. Throughout this report, the data collected was compared with the information on languages included in the electronic database 'Ethnologue'.

Lists of interesting vocabulary and expressions are provided where possible, to emphasise correct translation, challenge the practice of literal and word-by-word translation, and show where cultural knowledge and linguistic ability intersect.

⁶ Internal displacement is common in Sudan, as it is in Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. The association ethnic group-language may prove to be faulty.

⁷ This does not prove fluency in the language.

⁸ All of them were Sudanese. Despite their claim, switch to Sudanese Arabic did occur among these members of the same linguistic community when taking part in focus-group interviews.

SUDAN

Northern Sudan is predominantly Arabic-speaking. Central-northern Sudan includes Khartoum, the regions of Shamāl Kurdufan and al-Jazirah,⁹ which are characterized by linguistic diversity, although the dominant language is Sudanese Arabic. The languages of major interest in Western Sudan are Fur and the variation of Arabic called Fur Arabic. Moving south, the Nuba Mountains offer two main language groups belonging to two different language families, Nilo-Saharan and Niger-Congo. In Baḥr al-Ġazāl, we notice the presence of Ndogo, formerly an inter-group language, now spoken as mother tongue by the majority of the population. Dinkaland is the region where languages belonging to the Dinka sub-group are spoken. Finally, Southern Sudan gives us the opportunity to study two major Equatorial languages, Bari and Moru, and one very interesting example of a *lingua franca*: Juba Arabic.¹⁰

ARABIC

Arabic is known as Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic.¹¹ The differences between Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and any variety of spoken Arabic is *significant*.

Each Arab country has its own varieties of spoken Arabic. It is possible to group such varieties of Arabic into Egyptian, Sudanese, Saudi Arabian, Northwestern African, Syrian (including Lebanon and Jordan), and Iraqi. In terms of vocabulary, the listed varieties of Arabic present a high lexical similarity, although regional differences can be misleading. The Sudanese Arabic word *barād*, for instance, means ‘teapot’, although in Syrian Arabic is usually translated as ‘refrigerator’.¹² The root of the word *barād* is *b(a)r(a)d(a)*, whose basic meaning in Modern Standard Arabic is ‘to be cold’.

Arabic speakers do not necessarily keep Modern Standard Arabic and their own dialect separate. They mix them according to their educational background, the formality of the social event, and the complexity of the subject. Recently, a new linguistic phenomenon has arisen, which sees a minority of well-educated Arabs mixing and code-switching¹³ Arabic and English.

Sudanese Arabic

Sudanese Arabic is an Afro-Asiatic, Semitic language. It is sometimes referred to as ‘Khartoum Arabic’. Since 1955, various governments in Sudan employed Sudanese

⁹ The official transliteration system Arabic-English will be employed throughout this report. These place names are often spelled ‘Kordofan’ and ‘Gezira’.

¹⁰ Information on language families, groups, and sub-groups is found in Appendix II.

¹¹ Here Modern Standard Arabic is intended as the language of media, politics, literature, and education throughout the Arab world.

¹² This is an actual example from an interview. The asylum seeker reported being hit by a teapot while the interpreter translated the word as ‘refrigerator’.

¹³ Code-switching has been described as the use of two or more linguistic varieties within the same conversation.

Arabic in the process of ‘arabization’ and ‘islamization’ of the country. It has gradually been imposed as a national language. Several ethnic groups – particularly in the West and South – still reject the status of Sudanese Arabic as a national language. They do so by strengthening local vernaculars and *lingua francas*. This is particularly the case with Dinka and Equatorial languages, including Juba Arabic, Bari, Moru, and Ndogo.

Dialects

Sudanese Arabic dialects are traditionally divided into

- Northern dialects: Shaygiyya
- Eastern dialects: Shukriyya, Rifa’a
- Western dialects: Baggara
- Central dialects: Khartoum, Ja’aliyyin¹⁴

In the opinion of most interviewees, such division may no longer be accurate. The phenomenon of internal displacement, in fact, contributed to the spread of Kurdufan Arabic and the relative assimilation of such dialects. The areas affected include Kurdufan, Dar Fur, and the Nuba Mountains. Many people living in the countryside made an effort to learn Kurdufan Arabic to avoid marginalization, or acquired it when they moved to an urban centre. Displaced people brought along their language. Phenomena such as language contact, language evolution, and language denial¹⁵ consequently took place. *For this reason, it can be very difficult to identify an ethnic group with a specific language.*

Situation in Cairo

Sudanese Arabic is spoken as a first language by 65% of the Sudanese refugee population interviewed in Cairo. The variety of Arabic used by Sudanese refugees interviewed in Cairo reflects their degree of ‘arabization’ as well as their willingness to adopt Modern Standard or Egyptian Arabic.¹⁶ Their ideological identification with one ethnic group or tribe may lead them to unconsciously reject any possibility of their improving their Arabic, if it is not their mother tongue.

About 90% of Sudanese refugees interviewed claimed that Egyptians cannot perfectly understand Sudanese Arabic. The two languages differ in terms of vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, grammar, intonation, accentuation, stress, and tempo. This may make communication difficult, as such differences can be misleading or puzzling. In addition, Sudanese Arabic itself differs according to

¹⁴ Languages of Sudan, http://www.ethnologue.com/show_country.asp?name=Sudan: 10th April 2003.

¹⁵ The latter is the case particularly when Kurdufan Arabic was felt as the language of the dominant class.

¹⁶ As we will see later, some of them adopt Sudanese Arabic as an inter-ethnic, urban language, and prefer to use their mother tongue at home.

regional variations. In case of miscommunication, Sudanese refugees declared they would revert to Egyptian Arabic.¹⁷

Northern Sudanese male refugees who have children who were born in Cairo were interviewed. They tended to emphasise their children's fluency in Egyptian Arabic, saying that they learnt it in the street. The vast majority of these children do not have access to education, and spend most of their time at home watching Egyptian TV. However, they know Sudanese Arabic as well, since this is the language spoken at home. Between Arabic dialects code-switching is occasionally witnessed in these children.

These refugees had been living in Cairo for about six or seven years, and they were now in their forties/fifties. They all adamantly declared that their Sudanese Arabic is unchanged. They all added that they reject any unnecessary contact with Egyptians. According to them, this is necessary to preserve their culture. They were unemployed. Their wives all worked, some of them with Egyptian families. According to their husbands, these women never use any Egyptian Arabic at home.

A very small minority of the Northern Sudanese interviewed spoke fluent English. They were all well-educated (university level). They spoke fluent Modern Standard and Sudanese Arabic. Only two of them spoke one vernacular, Mahas.¹⁸ Their English tended to be rather academic. They confessed they often face problems when communicating with native English speakers, particularly when interpreting.¹⁹ They claimed to have no problem talking to Egyptians, although they would never switch to Egyptian Arabic.

Some Sudanese refugees interviewed who previously worked as traders claimed to have learnt one of the following dialects: Dinka, Bari, Nuer, Shilluk, Ndogo, Moru, and Juba Arabic.²⁰ Some of them settled down and married in the areas where they were working. Later, they adopted the host language, and their children grew up bilingual. In Cairo, they have the choice not to speak their mother tongue. Two of the interviewees said that their command of the acquired language is not good. One of these said that he would prefer to speak it during an interview. He did not seem to be aware of the risks of miscommunication.²¹

¹⁷ A good command of Egyptian Arabic may not be enough to prevent the phenomenon called 'involuntary code-switching': under psychological pressure, the speaker may involuntarily insert vocabulary and expressions typical of Sudanese Arabic, which may not be readably understandable.

¹⁸ Mahas is a Sudanese Nubian language. It is dealt with later in this report.

¹⁹ One major source of complaint among Sudanese English speakers is that native English speakers (officials) would often not make any effort to speak slowly, simplify their syntax, and flatten their accent.

²⁰ Dinka, Bari, Ndogo, and Juba Arabic in particular are very useful, as they are as well trade languages.

²¹ It is here assumed that an interpreter speaking the language he acquired would be present, and that the interviewer would not ask any specific question regarding their linguistic background.

Eastern Sudan

A few Sudanese refugees from Kassala (Eastern Sudan) were interviewed. They belonged to the Hadendoa tribe. They spoke Bedawy language,²² whose dialects are Nourab, Nafraab, Kemeilab, and Orteiga.²³ Apparently, when Bedawy speakers communicate with other tribes such as the Halanka, they may use a broken form of Sudanese Arabic. Its pronunciation and lexical features renders it fairly unintelligible to Khartoum Arabic speakers. The Engassana, Fulfulde, and the so-called Blue Nile tribes²⁴ also have the same problem. Although comprehensible to them,²⁵ they may face slight difficulties, if they accept to have an interview in this language.²⁶

Brief linguistic analysis

Sudanese refugees in Cairo use more Modern Standard Arabic words and expressions than do Egyptians. They introduce less colloquialisms and words of foreign origins than Egyptians. A Southern Sudanese university student will use English loanwords such as *distrikt* = district, *pikap* = pick up (a kind of truck), *janaral* = in general, generally speaking. By contrast, Northern Sudanese refugees tend to oppose such use. On the other hand, Northern Sudanese refugees seem to be more open to borrowing from Gulf Arab Countries (modern technology terminology) and the Egyptian film industry (Egyptian Arabic). *Indhu kūṣā*, for instance, is one example of Colloquial Egyptian Arabic expression that Northern Sudanese would use: literally, it means ‘he has got courgette’, although its idiomatic meaning is ‘he has got good connections’.

Sudanese Arabic: most noticeably, it turns the sound [q] into [g], like in *daqiqā* (minute), which becomes *dagiga*. The [j] is usually pronounced as in Modern Standard Arabic. Egyptian Arabic speakers in Cairo tend to turn the [q] into a glottal stop and the [j] into a [g]. The glottal stop [ʔ] and the sound [ʔa] (like in *ʔarīf* = knowing) are usually clearly pronounced by Sudanese Arabic speakers, unlike Egyptian Arabic speakers.

Determination in Sudanese Arabic is often supported by a demonstrative, like in *al-bint di* (this girl). As opposed to Egyptian, Sudanese Arabic appears to be closer to Modern Standard Arabic in pronunciation, vowelling (verb conjugation), and borrowing.

The genitive construction presents the following variations: in Sudanese Arabic, the use of *hagg* was noticed, whereas *bitāʔ* is said to be used in urban centres; *ʔallīl* is

²² This is a Cushitic language that is found in Eritrea as well (see footnote no.144). It is sometimes called Beja. It appears that members of the Hadendoa tribe may refer to their language as Hadendoa.

²³ These refugees estimated their lexical similarity at 90%.

²⁴ Also originally from Eastern Sudan. Except for Fulfulde (Fellata in Sudanese Arabic), no record of the Halanka and Engassani tribes was found. The expression ‘Blue Nile tribe’ was used by some Sudanese refugees interviewed in Cairo when referring to Eastern Sudanese groups.

²⁵ As pointed out above, Khartoum or Sudanese Arabic is the national language in Sudan. It is the language of media, education, trade, and politics.

²⁶ The area is characterized by high illiteracy rate and little contact with the rest of the country.

apparently found in the rural population of the Centre-North, and *hana* would be mainly used by the *Baggara* tribe. For example: *al-ḥimār da hagg Ahmed*, meaning ‘here is Ahmed’s donkey’.

Sudanese Arabic expression list

The following terms are very often used by Sudanese refugees in Cairo, and may give a clearer picture of the psycholinguistic dimension of a great share of them:

Osheen: The name of a girl who works as a maid in a Japanese soap opera. She is often mistreated by her employers, other than underpaid. Sudanese women may say *Anā osheen kulla yaum*, to say that they regular work as house cleaners

Arba'a wa nusf: Cairo suburban area (outskirts of Nasr City). It means ‘four and a half’, i.e., Km 4.5 at the beginning of the Cairo-Suez road. It is a synonym to social uneasiness, lack of basic, education, and social services. It is mostly inhabited by Sudanese refugees who are originally from the Nuba Mountains

Lāji': Asylum seeker or refugee. A simple word, which has a remarkable impact on the psyche of very many displaced persons, to the extent that it often ceases to be mere description of a status: it acquires a diminishingly sterile connotation, and is frequently abused by refugees themselves in their perpetual quest for assistance and indulgence

Samāra: Dark-skinned or colored person (again, used by Egyptians, and frequently reported by Sudanese refugees as slightly insulting)

Honga Bonga: Egyptian slang meaning a black person (as above, some interviewees claimed that this expression has become part of the average conversation among Sudanese refugees, as it happens to them so often to be insulted in such a way in the street)

Zā al-zift: Meaning ‘in a very bad condition’. This is an Egyptian Arabic expression which Sudanese refugees tend to use

Itbahdal: Humiliated or in a very bad shape: the daily experience for many Sudanese refugees

<i>Kaša:</i>	Raid carried out by the police (A Sudanese refugee might say <i>Ana kašuni</i> = the police raided my place)
<i>Fīš wa tašbīh:</i>	One's fingerprints supposedly requested to keep a record of any unwanted foreigner in the country by Egyptian security
<i>Saha:</i>	a place in Six of October City, where Sudanese refugees wait to get picked up by potential employers (manual work)
<i>Himār:</i>	Donkey (insult used by Egyptians to address Sudanese refugees)
<i>Bahīma:</i>	Cattle or beast (as in <i>himār</i>)
<i>Aulād al-balad:</i>	Used by Northern Sudanese refugees, often equal to ‘true Sudanese’ (literally: ‘sons of the country’), as opposed to non-Arab; Sudanese may claim to be Arabs or non-Arabs, and this is often source of racial dispute
<i>‘Araq:</i>	Sudanese alcoholic drink made of dates, largely used, particularly by Southern Sudanese refugees in Cairo; alcoholism appears to be a problem among Sudanese refugees, and alcohol consumption may be one of the reasons why a refugee performs badly during a status-determination interview
<i>Bakkār:</i>	Egyptians often address Sudanese refugees with the name of this Nubian boy, protagonist of a cartoon. This is often source of puzzlement to Sudanese refugees. They cannot, in fact, understand why Cairenes do not seem to come to terms with the fact that a great share of Nubians is actually of Egyptian nationality.

Fur Arabic

Hausa, Zaghawa, Masaleet, Tama, and Fur are among the languages spoken in Western Sudan.²⁷ According to Western Sudanese refugees interviewed, Fur Arabic is used as an inter-group language subject to local variations. There are apparently some significant differences between Sudanese and Fur Arabic.

²⁷ Hausa is a Chadic language, usually spoken in Nigeria; Zaghawa, Masalit, Tama, Fur, are Nilo-Saharan languages. Zaghawa is spoken in several parts of Sudan; Tama may sometimes be called Sungor, and is originally a Chad language.

For example, in Fur Arabic the first plural pronoun ‘we’ is used instead of the first singular pronoun ‘I’. Such grammatical usage expresses modesty.²⁸ According to the Fur refugees interviewed, it mirrors the belief according to which only the devil speaks about himself. The use of Fur language’s idiomatic expressions, vocabulary, and syntactic structures which Fur speaker translates directly into Arabic is another characteristic which must not be underestimated by an interpreter.²⁹

Brief linguistic analysis

Fur Arabic changes [ǧ] into [h]: *ǧāitu* (anyway) becomes *haitu*. Most Fur Arabic speakers share with Juba Arabic speakers the tendency of ignoring the emphatic sound [h]. Omission of the definite article *al* has also been indicated as occurring in Fur Arabic.

Probably, vowel variation in the Fur Arabic verbal system is the most interesting feature that was mentioned. In addition, a high degree of differences in terms of masculine/feminine agreement between Sudanese and Fur Arabic has been indicated, although data are presently not available for this report.

Juba Arabic

Juba Arabic is spoken in Southern Sudan. The area includes Equatoria, Bahr al-Ġazāl, and Upper Nile regions. Juba Arabic is also called Sudanese Creole³⁰ or Southern Sudanese Arabic. This language developed in the South as a *lingua franca* or dominant inter-group language during the colonial era.³¹ At that time, education in English was brought to Southern Sudan. In addition, the following vernaculars were transcribed, mainly to serve administrative and religious purposes: Nuer, Ndogo, Zande, Dinka, Shilluk, Bari, and Moru.³² Due to the lack of any long-term language policy, Juba Arabic never acquired literary form.³³ Juba Arabic is based on Arabic, and borrows heavily from Equatorial languages, particularly Bari, Moru, and Dinka.³⁴

As a *lingua franca*, speakers resist its assimilation into Sudanese Arabic. Its daily use, in fact, is to be seen as ideologically charged. The decision to speak Juba Arabic implicitly opposes any decision to turn Sudan into an Arab and Islamic country.³⁵ About 60% of Southern Sudanese refugees interviewed in Cairo spoke Juba Arabic fluently, the exception being when they grew up in remote areas. Juba Arabic and Sudanese Arabic are only partially intelligible to one another, although their lexical

²⁸ Unlike the *pluralis majestatis*, which was used by the *Khedive* in Ottoman times.

²⁹ In this respect, it should be noticed that the vast majority of Fur women are illiterate and do not speak fluent Arabic.

³⁰ Such a definition is debatable, if we consider that the term ‘creole’ describes a language formed from the contact of a European language with another (in this case African) language.

³¹ Between middle 19th and 20th century.

³² Reference to these languages is given later in this report.

³³ Interestingly, Juba Arabic is written by using Latin characters.

³⁴ To a much lesser extent, it borrows from English as well, although speakers usually tend to be unaware of this, unless they went through schooling in this language.

³⁵ Southern Sudan is mainly Christian.

similarity is significant. This is due to syntactical, pronunciation, and grammatical differences. It is as well the result of lexical borrowing from the above-mentioned vernaculars which is direct expression of Southern Sudanese/Equatorial cultures.

Brief linguistic analysis

Juba Arabic speakers tend to systematically change [h] into [k], like in the word *washān* (dirty), which is pronounced *waskān*. The same seems to happen with [ǧ] like in *saǧayyir* (small), which is turned into *sakayyir* or *sakhayyir*. Notice the loss of the emphatic consonant [s]. The consonant [h] either becomes [h] or is more frequently replaced by a glottal stop [ʔ], like in *hafla* (party), which is likely to become *ʔfla*. The same happens with words such as *šuhūr* (months) > *šuʔūr*. The sound [š] in words such as *muškīla* (problem) becomes [s] > *muskīla*. More interestingly, [z] is likely to become [j]: *zamān* (a long time ago) is pronounced *jaman*. Double consonants are not pronounced and the [ā] becomes [e]: *ummhu* (his mother) > *umu*, and *lākin* (but) > *lekin*.

Juba Arabic does not present a gender system like in Modern Standard Arabic, to the extent that the final vowel [a] is not perceived as a feminine marker. Differences in number agreement between Sudanese and Juba Arabic have been indicated, although data are presently not available for this report.

Notes on idiomatic expressions

A very few regional words and expressions were recorded among Southern and Fur Arabic speakers. The following are given by way of example: *marāʾa mubaddala sākīt* means ‘a woman of ambiguous behaviour’; *biyʾ gilā* means ‘he marries her’; *gafalu-l-bāb* is an idiomatic expression that means ‘she is engaged’ (literally: ‘they have closed the door’). Juba Arabic speakers who spent some time in Khartoum seem to be familiar with expressions such as *nafs al-ḥikāya* (‘nothing has changed’),³⁶ and to have learnt more literary expressions, although they might be subject to the semantic confusion typical of second language learners. If Sudanese Arabic is not their mother tongue, the way they express themselves may be misleading, although they are fluent in this language.³⁷

SUDANESE LANGUAGES

The Sudanese refugees interviewed in Cairo whose mother tongue is not Sudanese Arabic speak the following languages, sometimes in addition to a variety of Arabic:³⁸

- Bari, Dinka, Fur, Masalit, Moro-Madi, Moru, Ndogo, Nuba, Nubian, Nuer, Shilluk, Zaghawa, and Zande.³⁹

³⁶ This expression is largely understood in the Arabic-speaking world.

³⁷ In other words, they would insert grammatical and syntactical features typical of their language when speaking Arabic.

³⁸ Their degree of bilingualism varies. To attempt any evaluation on this subject is beyond the scope of this report.

³⁹ No Sudanese Fulfulde (called Fellata in Sudan), Adamawa, or Sudanese Anuak speakers were interviewed. It would be interesting to find out if there are representatives of these languages in Cairo.

DINKA

Dinka is a Nilotic language. It is the second language spoken in Sudan in order of importance. Apparently, Dinka are the largest refugee group in the Egyptian capital. However, it is rather problematic to attempt an estimate of the exact number of speakers, given the lack of reliable statistical sources.

Dinka is spoken in Southern Sudan, in Baḥr al-Ġazāl, in Upper Nile, along both sides of the White Nile, in Southern Kurdufan (Abū Yai area), in the area bordering on Equatorial Sudan (around Bor), and in the area south-east of the Nuba Mountains.

According to the Dinka refugees interviewed, Dinka language lacks a standard form. Dinka Rek is sometimes taken as the dialect of reference, particularly in Dinka education. A group of researchers is currently working on a Dinka-English dictionary (in Khartoum), which should include – for each entry – relevant dialectal variations.

Dialects

The Dinka dialects spoken in Cairo are⁴⁰

- Rut, Thol, Ageer, and Luac (traditionally spoken in the Upper Nile region);
- Alor, Ngok, and Ruweng (traditionally spoken in the Baḥr al-Ġazāl region towards border with Southern Kurdufan);
- Gok, Ciec, and Agar (traditionally spoken in the area north of the town of Bor);
- Athoc and Tuic (traditionally spoken in the Bor area and towards the border with Ethiopia); and
- Aguok, Rek, Abiem, Luac, Malual, and Tuic (traditionally spoken in the Baḥr al-Ġazāl region).⁴¹

Situation in Cairo

A good share of the Dinka refugees interviewed in in Cairo had at least two years of secondary school. According to them, this is due to the opportunity to access good quality schooling that they were given by foreign missions in Dinkaland.

About 70% of Dinka refugees interviewed were men in their middle thirties/beginning of their forties. Those of them who went to school in Dinkaland

⁴⁰ Information regarding the degree of lexical similarity between and reciprocal intelligibility of these dialects is currently not available.

⁴¹ It should be noted that there is a variation of Gok and Tuic spoken east of Bor.

received their education in Dinka up to the beginning of their secondary school, and then in English. They all pointed out that they were forced into education in Arabic when they were in secondary school. As a result, they claimed imperfect trilingualism. For this very reason, they find themselves at loss when having to write their language; their English has deteriorated and their Modern Standard Arabic is not perfect. In this respect, an interesting phenomenon was noticed: if asked to write down any account given by a speaker in Dinka, they would translate it mentally into Modern Standard Arabic, and use this language to reformulate the speaker's words in writing. It was assumed that interpreting into English would have to go through the same process.⁴²

Knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic appears to be good among the well-educated only. For the majority of Dinkas in general, Sudanese Arabic seems to be a bit of a foreign dialect. Those of them who are originally from Southern Dinkaland had some knowledge of Juba Arabic.

20% of the Dinka refugees interviewed were about twenty years old, and grew up in Khartoum or the region of al-Jazirah. Most of them claimed fluency in Dinka, as this is the language they have always spoken at home. They were all fluent in Sudanese Arabic, although only one of them claimed to be familiar with Modern Standard Arabic.

The general knowledge of Arabic was poor among the Dinka women interviewed. Only one of them spoke fluent English.

Dinka expression list

The following is a selection of Dinka concepts, which may be useful in the process of understanding the complexity of their culture and appreciating the possible difficulties which an interpreter may encounter when having to orally translate them:

Kooc e nhom (idiom): it literally means 'raising the head', although its idiomatic meaning is 'taking the place of a father'. It is related to the concept of *dhieth*, 'birth', and implies the need of a male member of Dinka society to procreate in order to be able to transfer identity. Should a man die before bearing offspring, it is the task of his brother to take his wife and assure the continuation of lineage.⁴³

Akic dhieth (idiom): directly linked to the above-mentioned concept. It literally means 'he has not given birth'. Idiomatically, though, it means 'he is not proud of his son'. Used when the father rejects his son as undeserving his name.⁴⁴

⁴² Except that the interpreter would not have the time to write down his translation in Modern Standard Arabic before rendering the speaker's words in English.

⁴³ This may be source of cultural misunderstanding, particularly when the refugee is asked to talk about his close family relations.

⁴⁴ This may have implications on names as they appear on a passport or an application form or given in any formal occasion.

Cieng (verb and noun, semantically-complex): as a verb it could be translated as ‘to live in the community’, ‘to interact’, particularly if found in the form of *cieng baai*. As a noun it may mean ‘behaviour’, ‘conduct’, and ‘human relations’. It is related to the concept that each aspect of Dinka life in society has its own *cieng*, that is, every Dinka should behave in a certain way (according to Dinka society rules). Respect, loyalty, and human values are part of everybody’s *cieng*.⁴⁵

Dheeng (noun, semantically-complex): literally, it roughly means ‘dignity’. If its idiomatic value is considered, it has to do with the way a man dresses, walks, talks, and eats. From an aesthetic point of view, an *adheeng* (adjective) refers to a ‘gentleman’. In other words, it is used to describe someone’s social status.

Abaar (noun, semantically-complex): it could be turned into ‘orphan’, although one needs to specify that he is someone who was ‘taken along by the dead man’. In other words, someone who has no relations who could arrange his marriage and guarantee his and his father’s *Kooc e nhom*.⁴⁶

Thiang (noun, culture-specific): this is a contagious disease (apparently, similar to diarrhea) that a mother who does not abstain from sexual intercourse during the period of time she is breast-feeding could transmit her son.⁴⁷

Gur (noun, culture-specific): along the same line, sex between the couple during pregnancy is believed to be good for facilitating delivery. Literally, it means ‘natural incubation’, ‘hatching’.⁴⁸

FUR

The Fur population in Cairo is said to be second to the Dinka only. According to Fur refugees, there is a dearth of information regarding the Fur language.⁴⁹

Fur is a Nilo-Saharan language that is spoken generally in the Dar Fur region (80% of the Dar Fur population is Fur). One refugee interviewed claimed that this language is very complex.⁵⁰ Another interviewee claimed that Fur is one of the oldest languages

⁴⁵ According to one Dinka refugee interviewed: if this word is translated with no further explanation, the interviewer may not understand the relationship cause-effect which produced a certain behaviour – course of action. This is particularly true if such behaviour is culturally and ethically ununderstandable to the interviewer.

⁴⁶ A Dinka refugee reported not being able to explain to an interviewer the reasons why he never married.

⁴⁷ This could be potentially misleading if the client (female) expects her physician to know about this, and fails to give a comprehensive account of her child’s symptoms/possible cause for his illness.

⁴⁸ This may lead the patient to ignore her physician’s advice during pregnancy. Several cases of misinterpretation on the subject were reported.

⁴⁹ As a matter of fact, during the drafting of this report, only four Fur refugees interviewed appeared to have knowledge of their language.

⁵⁰ A poor knowledge of Fur would not enable an interpreter of this language to perform at best. In the opinion of the mentioned four Fur refugees interviewed, an uneducated Fur interpreter should not be allowed to translate, as his awareness of complex meanings may be poor. His rendition into the target language will probably be as poor as his

recorded in the world. Its vocabulary range would be very wide. Besides, it would have the capacity of creating vocabulary in response to the new technology trends.⁵¹ This has apparently allowed the Fur language to maintain its pure structure, which has been almost unaffected by the ‘arabization’ process in Western Sudan.⁵²

Dialects

Fur has one recorded dialectal variation: Furawi. It includes two sub-dialects: Forok and Konjara, which present 80% lexical similarity. It is spoken in Dar Sila as well, where Fur speakers tend not to speak any variation of Arabic fluently and do not usually know English. As in Dar Fur, speakers are usually uneducated. The possibility of bilingual Berti⁵³ and Birked⁵⁴ speakers using Fur language was also mentioned.⁵⁵

Situation in Cairo

All the Fur refugees interviewed speak Fur language as their mother tongue in almost all situations, at home and outside. Around 20% of them can speak Fur Arabic. Less than 5% of them are completely fluent in any variation of Arabic. Fur children in Cairo tend therefore to grow imperfectly bilingual in Fur Arabic and Egyptian Arabic.⁵⁶

Although they are Muslim, they do not regard knowledge of Arabic as important. In this respect, they were unanimous in stating that their perception of Arabic has been affected by their opposition to the ‘arabization’ process.⁵⁷

Fur expression list

The following few expressions in Fur language were given as an example of metaphorical language which can potentially be misleading during an interpreting session:

Dalde Kowe eng Waar Ajuluba: ‘do not get a copy of the key before you get the house’ (literally: ‘do not buy baby clothes before you have a child’). This expression is used as an advice of caution. An interpreter might simply translate it as ‘Be careful’.⁵⁸

understanding of the necessity to explain any concept which is culture-specific.

⁵¹ Long absence from the region of origin may prevent an interpreter from keeping up with his language’s vocabulary lexical development.

⁵² The capacity of a language to resist increasing borrowing from a dominant language (in this case, Sudanese Arabic) obviously does not make things easy for the government officials in charge of language planning.

⁵³ Berti is spoken in Dar Fur and Kurdufan. It is a Nilo-Saharan language. During the draft of this report, it was not possible to gather more information on Berti language.

⁵⁴ Birked is spoken in Northern Dar Fur, east of Daju, east of Jabal Marra. Nuba refugees reported having met Birked speakers in Al-Obeyd, in Sudan. Like Berti, Birked is a Nilo-Saharan language. There might be a few Birked-speaking refugees in Cairo, although this requires further investigation.

⁵⁵ Inter-marriage was given as the main reason for such phenomenon of bilingualism.

⁵⁶ Imperfect bilingualism does not allow the speaker to be equally fluent in both languages.

⁵⁷ In other words, they do not think of Arabic as the language of the Koran.

⁵⁸ Conciseness or wordiness when having to express any concept in a given language are both related to such language’s

Ulul ing paara Ba Dagi ing potting ngi: ‘You have a nice smile’. Said when one pretends to be happy with someone’s actions.

Baang Kawrong Jaw Na Kassa Kappeng Jaa: ‘what you have done is really meaningless’. Surprisingly, it is used to imply that one will later suffer greater consequences.

NUBA MOUNTAINS

As in Dar Fur, the ‘arabization’ and ‘islamization’ process carried out in the Nuba Mountains has been perceived by Nuba refugees in Cairo as part of the Sudanese government’s plan to annihilate the Nuba culture. According to them, some unsuccessful attempts have been made to resist such process.⁵⁹ Most Nuba refugees interviewed were Muslim and bore a typically Muslim name, although a small share of them claimed to have also been given a name in a local Nuba language or dialect.

Dialects

The following Nuba Mountains language division was elaborated according to the data collected in Cairo. It rejects the notion of ninety-nine mountains, ninety-nine tribes, and ninety-nine languages. Linguistic reality seems to indicate the presence of four language sub-groups whose average degree of lexical similarity runs 60% to 70%. Each of these sub-groups was subdivided into a number of reciprocally intelligible dialects (up to 95% lexical similarity):

Ajang (Nilo-Saharan) – variations of this language are spoken by nearly twenty sub-tribes, including Karcho (written),⁶⁰ Kujeyria, Fanda, Shifeel, Kaasha, Waleh, Dalenj, Krooru, Kurtala, Kulleji, Kurghul, Dabadna, Abu Junook, Angarko, Khulfan, Kaafera, Kudur, and Dabab. They are all intelligible to one another, although lexical differences are to be found. Speakers are usually Muslim and are originally from the northern Nuba Mountains. In Cairo, this probably represents the largest Nuba sub-group.

Ama (Nilo-Saharan) – it is also called Nyimang (written). Speakers are originally from northern Nuba Mountains. Its dialects are: Silara, Kallara, Tundeya, Nitel, Alfos, Hajar, Kurumeti, Kakara, Mandal, Subay, and Mandal Atlan. There are slight lexical and pronunciation differences between them.

semantic and syntactical features. It has also much to do with the speaker’s linguistic behaviour. In the process of interpreting a language, conciseness can become wordiness in the target language, and *vice versa*.

⁵⁹ Nuba Mountains refugees in Cairo often speak of a social phenomenon which they call ‘freedom unawareness’. Such phenomenon is well-represented by the reported trend towards religious intermarriage (i.e., Muslim and Christian), in the assumption that religious differences do not matter as much as the regime in Khartoum believes. This may well result in a form of linguistic syncretism, if the language spoken by mixed Christian – Muslim refugees is Arabic and turns out to be the cultural expression of different religious orientations

⁶⁰ Further investigation would be needed to find out whether any of the other Ajang dialects have a written form

Kawalib (Niger-Congo): Eban, Om Hetan, Moro. The latter is said to be rather distinct in terms of lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation features.⁶¹

Kadugli (Niger-Congo) speakers are often referred to as Kogolo.⁶² Geographically, their origin is to be found in the southern Nuba Mountains. Miri is their main tribe, followed by Kega, Tuleshi, Kamdeng, Kurungu, Katcha, Anguru, Tabaya, Tata, and Talasa. These dialects are variations of Kadugli, which present minor lexical and pronunciation differences.

Situation in Cairo

Most of Nuba Mountains refugees interviewed in Cairo (80%) spoke Sudanese Arabic. About 40% of them claimed knowledge of one Nuba language. About 20% of them claimed passive knowledge of one Nuba language.⁶³ Most of the refugees interviewed never had access to secondary education.⁶⁴

BARI

According to some refugees interviewed, Bari (Beri) is to be considered as an inter-group language whose standardized form was determined by Christian missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. According to others, Bari should not be mistaken for Bai, which is an ancient Niger-Congo language apparently spoken in Baḥr al-Ġazāl.

Dialects

Bari (or Beri) has a number of local dialectal variations: Kuku, Pojulu, Ligo, and Kakwa. Some interviewees claimed that Kakwa is a separate language.⁶⁵

Situation in Cairo

A minority of the Bari (or Beri) speakers interviewed in Cairo claimed different degrees of knowledge of Juba Arabic. They all spoke Sudanese Arabic.

A few Ndogo⁶⁶ speakers were found among them, including two Kreish speakers.⁶⁷

⁶¹ One Nuba Moro speaker claimed that Moro is a separated language. No information on the subject is here available.

⁶² 'The ones who come from the valley'.

⁶³ Passive knowledge of a language is often the result of displacement, when parents do not regard as important to teach their language to their children, and nevertheless do not adopt the local language. These Nuba Mountains refugees grew up in Central Sudan (most of them in Khartoum), and appear to know very little of their parents' cultural and linguistic background. This indicates once more the necessity of not taking the association ethnic group/language for granted.

⁶⁴ The level of education in the Nuba Mountains was never really raised *in situ*. Many Nuba parents did not allow their children to move to an urban centre to go to school, as they were afraid they would never come back home.

⁶⁵ Kakwa is traditionally spoken in the Yei District, in Southern Sudan. Like Bari, it is a Nilo-Saharan language. Some Bari refugees called it Barikakwa. This might indicate a close similarity to Bari, although lack of speech-samples does not allow us to draw any conclusion on this matter.

⁶⁶ Ndogo is another interesting example of inter-group language. Information is found later in this report

⁶⁷ Kreish is a dialect of a language known as Gbaya. It is a Nilo-Saharan language, spoken mainly in southwestern Baḥr

About 20% of the Bari speakers interviewed spoke fluent English, although it was noticed that the vast majority had only some basic knowledge of this language.

Bari expression list

The following list of idiomatic expression in Bari (or Beri) language clearly shows the extent to which word-by-word translation can be highly misleading:⁶⁸

Nikaŋ na akolonya ko leme (idiom): it means ‘we are living in a place where there is food’, although its literal meaning is ‘our home is happy with new grass’.

Do aje no’ ko kudyeddu (idiom): ‘you have mixed it with dregs’. Its actual meaning is ‘you have made a mess’.

Lugwurku’dk molu pu’pudō ni (idiom): it means ‘if you go on quarrelling like that, you will destroy our home’. If translated literally, it will sound like ‘a water pool will spring up inside your house’.

Do koy so dipet (idiom): ‘you are wise like a fire-stone’, if translated literally; the real meaning is ‘you are intelligent, but you are a bad person too’.

Kolon’ dumba yokya (idiom): the right translation is ‘at five o’clock people stop working (because they are tired)’. Its literal meaning may be obscure: ‘the sun picks up the lazy ones’.

Nan so’so (idiom): it means ‘I will no longer pay attention to your complaints’, although it literally means ‘I will sit down’.

Do lo gwom ko wale I bongo’ (idiom): ‘you are hiding a knife under your clothes’, if you translate it literally. It means ‘you disguise some bad purpose under a smile’.

NUBIAN

Nubian is a Nilo-Saharan language, spoken both in Northern Sudan and Upper Egypt.

Dialects

Its dialects in Sudan are Mahas and Dongola.

Situation in Cairo

In Cairo, only well-educated older Nubian refugees speak their language,⁶⁹ which is written in a Greek-based alphabet and includes five special characters.

al-Ġazāl. The two Kreish speakers interviewed claimed to be trilingual Ndogo-Kreish-Bai.

⁶⁸ Community interpreters are subject to rapid decision-taking when consecutive-interpreting, and may not be able to provide the most accurate cultural translation if they are untrained.

Around the beginning of the sixteenth century, a major migration of Nubians from Northern Sudan into the Nuba Mountains took place.⁷⁰ This resulted in the development of a Nuba Mountains language which is apparently related to Mahas, although does not currently present any significant lexical similarity with any Nubian language.⁷¹

The adjectives Nuba and Nubian are nowadays related to two very different (culturally and historically) areas of Sudan, although they often appear to be source of confusion among service providers. Arguably, the fact that the English language seems to offer lexical agreement between the two adjectives contributes to such confusion. Good sense would suggest using the adjective Nuba for Nuba Mountains inhabitants, although refugees who are originally from this area tend to refer to themselves as Nubians.⁷²

Masalit, Nuer, Moru, Ndogo, Shilluk, Zande and Zaghawa

General information and dialects

Masalit is a Nilo-Saharan language, spoken in Western Sudan. Its dialects are Northern, Western, and Southern Masalit. They present a lexical similarity equal to 90%. It was suggested that there is some resemblance between Masalit and Mabān.⁷³

The Nuer language is also called Naath. Its main dialectal variations are: Eastern Nuer, Lau, Thiang, and Cien. It is a Nilo-Saharan language, spoken east of Dinkaland.

Moru is a Nilo-Saharan language that belongs to the Moru-Madi language group.⁷⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century there was an attempt to establish a standard form of Moru. The experiment was apparently carried out by Christian missionaries, who called the language Moru Miza, and created a written form. The dialects on which Moru Miza finds its linguistic basis are:

Maribo, Kadiro, Wandī, Gariya, Adir, Awokanya, Kodu, and Wira.

⁶⁹ No reason has been given for the decline of the Nubian language.

⁷⁰ Supposedly, this happened because of the spread of Islam in Northern Sudan, and many people took refuge in the Nuba Mountains to escape slavery.

⁷¹ This is based on several accounts given by both Nuba and Nubian refugees, although it was not possible to find either specific reference to this language or evidence that it still belongs to the Nubian language family. Also conflicting opinions on the relation between the words Nuba and Nubian were given. Ethimological clarification is here needed.

⁷² It is therefore advisable to constantly double-check, should any doubt arise, as both Nubians and Nubas may speak fluent Arabic as their first language.

⁷³ Mabān is also a Nilo-Saharan language. No evidence of similarity between the two languages was found.

⁷⁴ Also the language called Ma'di belongs to the same group, although its speakers are said to be originally from the Opari District, in Southern Sudan (Equatorial Sudan). Although Moru and Ma'di may be similar, they are to be considered as two languages belonging to the same group, Moru-Madi, precisely.

Ndogo is a Niger-Congo language spoken in Baḥr al-Ġazāl. According to the Ndogo speakers interviewed in Cairo, it is still spoken as an intergroup language by Bai and Sere⁷⁵ speakers. According to them, Ndogo was used as the region's language of reference by Christian missionaries at the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was given a written form.

Shilluk is a Nilo-Saharan language that is spoken in Southern Sudan between the Nile and Kurdufan. Zaghawa should not be mistaken for Zagawa. The first is a Nilo-Saharan language. The latter is used as a name for Zande, which is a Niger-Congo language. Zande speakers are traditionally located in Southern Sudan in the Uele River area.

Situation in Cairo

The five Masalit refugees interviewed in Cairo were Muslim, in their twenties, and spent part of their life in the Sudanese province of al-Jazirah, before migrating to Cairo. They were aware of Masalit language's dialectal variations, although only two of them spoke Masalit. They were all Sudanese Arabic speakers.⁷⁶

Bilingualism in Nuer and Sudanese Arabic may be one of Nuer refugees' main characteristics, similarly to Masalit, according to two interviewees. They said that Nuer is often mistaken for a Dinka language.⁷⁷

The Moru speakers interviewed in Cairo represent the above-mentioned dialects, although most of them tend to gradually shift to Moru Miza, whose status of standard language turns out to be reinforced.

The four Ndogo speakers interviewed in Cairo spoke this language as their mother tongue. In addition, they were fluent in Sudanese Arabic and English. They claimed that Ndogo refugees in Cairo tend to be as well-educated as Dinka refugees.

No substantial additional information regarding Shilluk, Zaghawa, and Zande was gathered.

⁷⁵ Sere might be another name for Ndogo.

⁷⁶ One interviewee suggested that his parents' Arabic is close to the variation of this language which is spoken in Chad.

⁷⁷ The two languages belong to the same family: they are Nilo-Saharan, Nilotic, and are part of the Dinka-Nuer language sub-group. They may share lexical features, although no evidence of this was gathered.

SOMALIA

A number of Somali refugees interviewed stressed the necessity of distinguishing between the two major Somali ‘national’ languages: Mahatiri and Maay.⁷⁸ Both are Cushitic languages. According to the interviewees, the two languages have a degree of mutual lexical intelligibility of about 50/60%.

Mahatiri is also called Standard Somali. It is spoken mainly in Somalia, Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Uganda.⁷⁹ It is based on dialects spoken in Northern Somalia, and is said to be close to the Benaadir dialect of Mogadishu. The two Somali languages include a number of regional languages or dialects.⁸⁰

MAHATIRI

The dialects mentioned by some of the speakers interviewed are Benaadir, and Ashraaf.⁸¹ None of the interviewees claimed knowledge of these dialects.⁸²

Mahatiri may be however partially unintelligible to Maay speakers.⁸³ Most Mahatiri speakers interviewed, however, claimed to understand Maay.⁸⁴

Mahatiri is the language of government, media, and education. Speakers can learn Mahatiri either in school or in a Mahatiri-speaking area or working in a Mahatiri-speaking environment.⁸⁵

The Mahatiri speakers interviewed reported that it is spoken in the Somali capital, by Dir, Gadabuursi, and Isxaaq clans.⁸⁶ The Hawiye⁸⁷ are said to speak a dialect of Mahatiri Somali, like the Daarood clans. The Abgaal and Gaaljaal speak Benaadir.

⁷⁸ Incidentally, these were Maay speakers. The term Mahatiri is seldom used by Somali speakers, and Maay is usually called Mai Mai. The Somali refugees interviewed tended not to make such distinction when asked about their mother tongue: they would simply say ‘I speak Somali’. This information was originally given as an answer to the question ‘do you speak any Somali dialect?’. Maay is thought to be one of the most ancient languages spoken in the Horn of Africa. It is originally spoken in the area of Somalia inhabited by the Digil clan.

⁷⁹ It was suggested that Uganda Somali-speakers speak English as their first language.

⁸⁰ Most informants gave this information, although none of them was able to be more specific or claimed to know any of these dialects, with the exception of one Rahanweyn speaker.

⁸¹ Ashraaf was reported to be only partially intelligible with Mahatiri.

⁸² It was not possible to find out whether they really did not speak any of these dialects or they were not aware of speaking a Mahatiri dialectal variation.

⁸³ About 70% of Maay speakers interviewed who speak Mahatiri admitted having learnt it after having been displaced to an urban centre. About 20% of them said they learnt it through media. Only 10% of them claimed to have learnt it in school. Mahatiri is supposed to be the language of primary education in Somalia.

⁸⁴ In this respect, an experiment was carried out: two Somali refugees (one Maay and one Mahatiri speaker) were asked to have a conversation. Each of them was asked to use their language. They later admitted that several communication difficulties had occurred.

⁸⁵ Since it is the language of media, one could easily assume that it is understood by everybody in the country. This appears to be true to a certain extent, although resistance to effective learning of Mahatiri is apparently present, particularly in the countryside.

⁸⁶ These clans are originally from northwest Somalia.

⁸⁷ Originally from Southern Somalia.

MAAY

The Maay-speaking informants who had knowledge of Mahatiri claimed that Mahatiri and Maay differ in terms of sentence structure, phonology, and vocabulary.⁸⁸ One Rahanweyn refugee pointed out that his dialect is related to Maay.⁸⁹

The Maay speakers interviewed mentioned the following: Tunni, Jiddi, and Dabarre. It was not made clear whether these are Maay dialects or separated languages. None of them claimed knowledge of any of these languages/dialects.

Other languages

95% of Somali refugees interviewed had very limited or no ability in Arabic.

Two interviewees who spoke Dabarre, a Cushitic language, were identified. They claimed they mainly use Maay in Cairo. They did not speak Mahatiri.

About 10% of the Somali refugees interviewed spoke fluent English.

Situation in Cairo

As pointed out above, Maay is considered by its speakers to be a national language. According to them, it is spoken mainly by people coming from Southern Somalia. In Somalia, Maay is not given any recognition: it is not an official language in the government, media or education, despite being widely spoken. It is not clear whether the Maay speakers interviewed were brought up either bilingual or monolingual.⁹⁰ In the opinion of two Somali refugees, Maay is important as an inter-group language to those who live in rural areas of Somalia and speak mutually unintelligible dialects.⁹¹

Language relations

If a Somali person says *I speak Somali*, s/he may mean

- I speak Maay, I am bilingual Maay-Dabarre (for instance), and I do not speak Mahatiri. If I listen to a conversation in Mahatiri, I understand up to 60% of what I hear. For this reason, I could interact with a Mahatiri speaker, although communication would be problematic. I express myself much better in Dabarre, but I cannot find a good Dabarre/English or Arabic interpreter, therefore I would have to accept being interviewed in Maay. This is, all in all, not too bad, although far from ideal.

⁸⁸ A Maay dictionary was not found. It is probably not available.

⁸⁹ When asked to be more specific, he said that his dialect is called Rahanweyn, which corresponds to his clan's name.

⁹⁰ Maay and a local dialect, which they possibly no longer speak. Maay or a local dialectal variation of Maay only.

⁹¹ The development of Maay into a *lingua franca* could be object of investigation of the modern Somali linguistic reality. Linguistic unity in this sense may have been perceived as political and strategic unity by Somali groups which suffered any form of political discrimination. In the past, Maay may as well have been a trade language spoken by members of clans living in culturally different areas characterized by the total absence of borders.

- I am bilingual Maay-Garre⁹² (for example), and imperfectly trilingual Maay-Garre-Mahatiri, since I went to school. I can express myself in any of these languages, and I also have knowledge of Arabic and/or English.
- I am bilingual Mahatiri-Jiddu⁹³ (for example), but do not speak Maay. I cannot understand Maay either. I speak English and some Arabic.⁹⁴
- Mahatiri is my mother tongue and I lost command of my clan language, as I have not spoken it on a regular basis for years. I am fluent in English and Arabic,⁹⁵ and I understand Maay, since I moved to a Maay-speaking area when I still was a kid. I am an interpreter, and I usually interpret for Maay speakers. I speak to them in Mahatiri, if they can understand it. Communication can be problematic, but not impossible.⁹⁶

Language use

Although Arabic is considered a national language,⁹⁷ very few of the Somali refugees interviewed appear to have a good command of this language. Arabic is perceived to be important, as it is the language of the Koran. Such perception does not seem to affect the linguistic choice which community members might make for themselves. A group of Somali refugees, for instance, claimed that the language attitude they consciously take on is ideologically charged, in that it rejects the Arabic language altogether.⁹⁸ According to them, the quality of their interaction with Egyptians is overall poor.⁹⁹

A fairly large share of the Somali refugees interviewed hoped to be either resettled or able to migrate to another country. They perceive Cairo as a transit zone.¹⁰⁰ A few others stated that they normally take on a completely different attitude, and spend quite an effort in speaking perfect Egyptian Arabic. They believe that this way they

⁹² Garre is a Cushitic language, supposedly spoken mainly in Southern Somalia. The presence of Garre-speaking in Cairo was mentioned, although none of them was interviewed.

⁹³ Jiddu was mentioned by a Somali refugee as an example of a Somali language which differs greatly from Standard Somali. No Jiddu speaker was interviewed during the drafting of this report.

⁹⁴ Possibly Egyptian Arabic.

⁹⁵ Egyptian Arabic. S/he had been living in Cairo for six years.

⁹⁶ This is a real situation reported by an interpreter at a Cairo-based service provider. Unawareness of the risks connected to such circumstances can lead to the wrong understanding of the client's case upon which decision is taken.

⁹⁷ It is not clear whether Arabic is used as an official language at all outside Arabic or Koranic schools. In the opinion of some Somali interviewed, such schools would not enable their students to gain real knowledge of Arabic. On the contrary, students would learn to read the Koran, although they would not acquire a comprehensive understanding of its content. Some of the Somali interviewed who claimed knowledge of Arabic, confessed they would feel at loss, if they were to read a newspaper written in this language. Four Somali refugees interviewed stated that their command of Arabic language is good because they had the chance to study it at university.

⁹⁸ They stated they would be able to interact in Arabic. They declared that their choice is determined by their reaction against the Somali involvement in the Arab League and the inefficiency of the latter in supporting a political solution to the Somali question.

⁹⁹ This may be the result of not practicing Arabic in Cairo and not being prepared to acquire Egyptian Arabic.

¹⁰⁰ They stated that they all would learn English, if they were given the opportunity.

can go unnoticed, especially by Egyptian security.¹⁰¹ According to the interviewees, Somali children tend to speak their parents' language at home and learn Egyptian Arabic in the street.¹⁰²

From the data collected, it was concluded that

- Very few Somali children have access to education in Cairo;¹⁰³
- Somalis who are now in their 20s and lived in Cairo for the last 5/10 years are fluent in Egyptian Arabic;¹⁰⁴
- Girls apparently learn Egyptian Arabic faster than boys;¹⁰⁵
- English is generally regarded as a language of prestige, and many Somalis disregard Arabic and learn English instead when they are given the opportunity;
- Somali teenagers' average knowledge of English is higher than that of their parents;¹⁰⁶
- Somali refugees in Cairo who speak fluent Italian are a small minority. Only one among the refugees interviewed who claimed proficiency in this language turned out to actually have a good command of this language.¹⁰⁷

An interesting phenomenon was observed during this research: a small share of Somali refugees were heard mixing Arabic and Somali. Superficial investigation of such occurrence led to divide them into two groups: those who had access to schooling under Siad Barre,¹⁰⁸ who studied Arabic and tend to mix Modern Standard

¹⁰¹ This is particularly true of Somali women, as long as they do not wear Somali traditional clothes.

¹⁰² Provided that their parents allow them to interact with locals. The Somali community, in fact, appeared to be more distrustful of outsiders than other communities in Cairo.

¹⁰³ In the long run, they might simply acquire proficiency in Egyptian Spoken Arabic.

¹⁰⁴ Only two among the refugees went to university in Cairo and are literate in Modern Standard Arabic.

¹⁰⁵ At first, this appeared to contradict the assumption that the Somali community is more closed than other communities in Cairo. Girls – in the opinion of most interviewees – definitely have far fewer opportunities than boys to interact with locals. The influence of TV, on the other hand, should be taken into account, as girls are likely to spend more time at home.

¹⁰⁶ This as well was source of some puzzlement, as the majority of the Somali teenagers interviewed declared to have had limited access to schooling, both in Somalia and in Cairo.

¹⁰⁷ The present situation should not allow any Somali refugee to have their interview in Italian, unless a native speaker tests their level of proficiency. These individuals may belong to the former Somali elite, have attended Italian higher education institutions, and may regard Italian as language of prestige, as opposed to Somali. The reason may lay behind their nostalgia for the role they played during the colonial period, their marginalization under the period following Somali independence, and the assumption of belonging to a small minority of distinguished well-educated and influential refugees.

¹⁰⁸ Some Somali refugees stated that the level of education under the former Somali dictator was good, although the vast majority of the interviewees denied this as a fact.

Arabic and Somali,¹⁰⁹ and a the second group who had been living in Cairo for a relatively long duration, and mix Egyptian Arabic and Somali.¹¹⁰

Representatives from both groups declared that such a language attitude makes them feel comfortable, particularly in terms of employing the right words and expressions. They admitted that they may not always have control over code-switching.¹¹¹ Further investigation into this phenomenon suggests that Somali women apply such code-switching more often than men.¹¹²

Command of English

A small minority of the Somali refugees interviewed in Cairo had a relatively good command of English. It was found that some English sounds represented by the letters c, q, r, and x are difficult for Somalis, as they are pronounced differently in Somali Mahatiri and Maay.¹¹³ In addition, in Somali Mahatiri¹¹⁴ each letter corresponds to one sound, unlike English. The English word *coat*, for instance, is likely to be pronounced as *co-at* by Somalis.

Somali Mahatiri has one pronoun for 'I' and 'me': *aniga*. This has reported to be source of confusion. Besides, like in Arabic, in Somali the use of the indefinite article *a – an* is unknown. Verbs tend to be placed at the end of the sentence, and this may result in syntactically misleading mistakes, should a Somali speak English.¹¹⁵

The Somali refugees interviewed pointed out that one major source of problems in translation may be given by the fact that Somali speakers tend to overuse proverbs. When speaking English, they are likely to translate them literally.

Somali expression list

The lack of decent Somali-English bilingual dictionaries may not allow interpreters to offer the most suitable translation for each of the following:¹¹⁶

Aqoon la'aani waa iftiin la'aan: 'ignorance is bad' (literally: 'being without knowledge is to be without light')

¹⁰⁹ Incidentally, the Somali refugees in Cairo who belong to this group are all Mahatiri speakers who claimed not to use Egyptian Arabic at all. They simply claimed knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic.

¹¹⁰ The second group is formed by both Mahatiri and Maay speakers.

¹¹¹ This may obviously cause communication problems, should their interlocutor not understand Arabic.

¹¹² Both Mahatiri and Maay speakers. This is to be seen in the light of the fact that Somali women are more likely than men to work, and specifically, are more motivated to learn Arabic.

¹¹³ During our conversation, for example, it was noticed that the word 'question' was pronounced as 'eguation'.

¹¹⁴ Somali Maay does not yet have a written form.

¹¹⁵ During another conversation, it was noticed that the normal syntactical order tended to be reversed and passive forms overused.

¹¹⁶ There are actually no decent bilingual dictionary available for any of the African languages object of this report (except for Modern Standard Arabic). One long-term project would be to provide interpreters of every language of interest in Cairo with glossaries including culture-specific words, expressions, and their most suitable translation into English. The list of words here given in this section was divided into semantic fields.

Ilko wada jir bey wax ku gooyaan: ‘unity is power’ (literally: ‘together our teeth can cut’)

Intaadan falin ka fiirso: ‘think before acting’ (literally: ‘look before you jump’).

Society:

Faqash: an abusive word used to address supporters of Somali ex-President Siyad Barre; *Mooryaan*: armed independent militias; *Diya*: a group of men who support each other and seek vengeance for what has been done to any of them; they usually belong to the same family or group; *Gaal*: used to address or refer to non-Muslim persons; *Xool Raacato*: a cattle-keeper, usually a nomad; *Yarad*: dowry paid to the family of the bride.

Daily life:

Bakaar: a covered hole used to store grain; *Derin*: a handwoven mat; *Canjeero*: a kind of pancake; *Dambiil*: a handwoven bag; *Macaawiis*: a garment used by men which looks like a long skirt.

Environment:

Dhobeey: agricultural areas (crop production) characterized by heavy soil; *Daaqsin*: grazing areas; *Muddul*: a round hut used by farmers, whose roof is cone-shaped; *Cariish*: a rectangular house; *Aqal*: a shelter used by nomads. It is transportable, and has a rounded vault; *Sar*: urban cement buildings; *Xeeb*: coastal area.

Food:

Odkac: preserved meat; the meat is first thinly cut, then fried, and finally put in oil; *Soor*: a kind of porridge; it is mainly used by farmers; *Xaaraan*: unclean (for Muslims); *Xalaal*: clean (for Muslims).¹¹⁷

ETHIOPIA

Ethiopia is a federal republic. Each state has its own official language, corresponding to the elected dominant ethnic group. For example: Oromo in Oromia, Somali in Zone 5, Tigray in Zone 1, Amharic in Zone 14.¹¹⁸ Many among the refugees interviewed in Cairo were in their middle twenties/thirties and spoke fluent Amharic. It had been the national language of education before the foundation of the Ethiopian Federal Republic. Ever since, each state has its own language of education, although Amharic still enjoys the status of national language in Ethiopia.

¹¹⁷ The last two adjectives refer to the correct procedure for the slaughtering of animals.

¹¹⁸ Zone 14 includes the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa.

The languages spoken by the Ethiopian refugees interviewed in Cairo are Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo.

Amharic

Amharic is the national language of Ethiopia. It is of Semitic origin. It is spoken throughout the country. It is the language of the country's dominant ethnic group, the Amhara. For this reasons, it enjoys the status of language of prestige.

About 80% of the Ethiopian refugees interviewed in Cairo spoke Amharic as their first or second language.¹¹⁹ Most of them seem to have lived in the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa.

It was reported that it is not unusual for Ethiopians to claim Amhara descent, although they may belong to other ethnic groups. It is very difficult to empirically establish their actual origin due to their proficiency in Amharic. For the same reason, it is also hard to find out whether someone who claims to be Amhara is of mixed Ethiopian-Eritrean origin or Eritrean. One of the reasons for choosing Amharic may be precisely related to the fact that this is the language of the dominant ethnic group in Ethiopia.¹²⁰

Tigrinya

Tigrinya, like Amharic, is a Semitic language. Amharic and Tigrinya share the same script, which is based on Geez, an ancient Afro-Asiatic, Semitic, and Ethiopian language, now extinct.

About 45% of the Ethiopian refugees interviewed in Cairo claimed to speak Tigrinya as their first language.¹²¹

Oromo

Oromo, unlike Amharic and Tigrinya, is a Cushitic language. Its spoken dialects in Cairo are Borana and Guj. Central and Western Oromo tend to differ in terms of vocabulary.¹²²

Interviewees confirmed that the degree of literacy among Oromo speakers in Cairo can be as low as 5%.

¹¹⁹ The degree of proficiency appeared to vary among those who spoke it as a second language.

¹²⁰ Several cases were reported in which Amhara interpreters would translate for an Amharic-speaking Ethiopian (of different ethnic origin, whether or not declared) and would take on an attitude of superiority towards the client. This would obviously damage the communication process.

¹²¹ About two-third of them claimed knowledge of Amharic as well.

¹²² The Oromo speakers interviewed spoke Amharic to different degrees of proficiency. None of them claimed perfect knowledge of Amharic.

Situation in Cairo

Amharic, Tigrinya, and Oromo can at any time be ideologically charged, and this obviously has obviously an impact on the level of communication between refugees in a refugee-interview context. Ethiopian refugees who are fluent in Amharic are usually perceived as well-educated. Popularly, Tigrinya is often a synonym for rebel, and Oromo for uncivilized.¹²³ Refugees may try to avoid speaking these two languages for ideological reasons or to conceal their past. If their proficiency of the language they choose is low, the communication process can be damaged. Particularly, because of the link between language and culture, and more specifically between thought process and language expression.¹²⁴ This can be highly misleading if the interpreter takes for granted the client's cultural background on the basis of the language in which the latter chooses to express himself.

Tigrinya speakers have their own community, as Amharic speakers have theirs. Sometimes the latter occurs regardless of their nationality, i.e., Ethiopian or Eritrean, particularly when they belong to the same religious community. This is also the case as to Oromo and Afar¹²⁵ speakers.

Ethiopian interviewees seemed to agree that educated countrymen are not more than 20/30% of the population.¹²⁶

The number of bilingual Tigrinya-Amharic or Oromo-Amharic in Cairo is difficult to be estimated, although it can be assumed that refugees who are originally from more rural areas may have a lesser knowledge of Amharic. It was also suggested that the number of Ethiopians in Cairo who are Oromo speakers is greater than one may assume. Many Oromo would 'hide' behind their knowledge of Amharic. In the opinion of one Amhara refugee, they tend nevertheless to retain their Oromo accent. For this reason, their real ethnic origin would be identifiable.¹²⁷

¹²³ One may be surprised by the impact of such associations – which may easily be regarded as trivial topics of conversation – on the psyche of refugees who are going through the status-determination process. Let us not forget that Oromo speakers may still be referred to as 'Gala', which means 'slaves'.

¹²⁴ Given that language is the linguistic means through which one expresses his own cultural background, the way of thinking with respect to any culturally-charged topic influences verbal interpretation of such subject. This has an impact on the choice of words and expressions employed to describe his perception of that topic. Such choice may turn out to be puzzling within a communication process. Let us not forget that in Modern Standard Arabic, the word homosexuality can be translated as *shidhūd jinsi*, which literally means 'sexual perversion'.

¹²⁵ Reference to Afar is made on page 34.

¹²⁶ 70% of this 20/30% did not finish secondary school. They seemed also to agree on the fact that most Ethiopians who went to school worked or lived in the capital, may speak Amharic as a first language, and have partially lost their mother tongue.

¹²⁷ According to another Amhara refugee interviewed, Oromo speakers tend to retain features of their language when speaking Amharic. This does not usually happen with Tigrinya native speakers, for example, and is probably due to the fact that – unlike Tigrinya – Oromo and Amharic do not belong to the same language family, and linguistically present syntactical and structural features which are substantially different.

The presence of Ethiopian refugees from Tigray in Cairo was recorded. Two refugees belonging to the group called Welkayt were interviewed. Its members are bilingual Amharic-Tigrinya, and are said to have mixed traditions¹²⁸. They stated that they rarely speak Tigrinya.¹²⁹

Other Languages

A minority of the Ethiopian refugees interviewed spoke the following languages:

Afar

A few speakers claiming a good command of this Cushitic language were interviewed.¹³⁰ Afar language is related to Saho,¹³¹ although distinct. The vast majority of both Afar and Saho speakers tend to be Muslim.

Afar has two dialects, Aussa and Baadu, although no speaker interviewed was aware of these variations. Afar speakers may or may not come from Ethiopia. Some sources suggested that Afar speakers in Cairo may actually come from Eritrea, although they were born and grew up in Gulf Arab states. For this reason, they would all be native Arabic speakers. They may or may not speak Amharic very well, although they would often claim to do so, as they may claim Ethiopian nationality. It can be extremely problematic to determine their actual origin, since relative knowledge of Amharic may solely be based on their mixed upbringing / schooling / stay in Addis Ababa.

Gurage

Gurage is a Semitic language, whose number of speakers in Cairo is said to be much reduced. Should their number increase, it should be taken into account that its dialects Silti, Walane, Soddo, and Gogot are not mutually intelligible, and that Amharic may recently have had some influence on its vocabulary.¹³² Most of them speak Amharic as their second language. The majority came from around Addis Ababa.

Somali Mahatiri

Only one Ethiopian refugee claimed to speak this language fluently. No evidence of more Ethiopian Somali-speaking refugees living in Cairo was gathered during the research.

¹²⁸ Apparently, they are referred to as the 'border people'.

¹²⁹ When the current government divided the country according to the ethnic origin of its inhabitants, they refused to be considered as Tigrinya, probably because they aspired to a higher social status through their claimed Amhara heritage. Such occurrences must be taken into account when allocating an interpreter, as neither the client nor the interpreter himself may feel comfortable with each other, even if they share the same language.

¹³⁰ Afar speakers can be from Djibouti or Somalia. This is one of the examples of how it can be difficult to determine someone's country of origin through investigation of their linguistic background.

¹³¹ Reference to Saho is made on page 37.

¹³² One Gurage speaker advanced the hypothesis that future Gurage refugees in Cairo may be bilingual Gurage-Amharic, unlike nowadays. This would be due to the high number of people displaced to Addis Ababa prior to emigration.

Gumuz

Gumuz is a Nilo-Saharan language. Apparently, a few Gumuz speakers live in Cairo, although only one of them was interviewed. Gumuz speakers are traditionally from near the border with Sudan, and are said to be physically similar to Southern Sudanese. They are said to be Sudanese Arabic speakers. They normally do not know Amharic. They may speak some Juba Arabic.

Anuak

Anuak is a Nilo-Saharan, Nilotic language, which is spoken mainly in Central Eastern Sudan. Ethiopian speakers of this language are said to be originally from the area of the river Baro.

The two Anuak speakers who were interviewed in Cairo did not speak any Amharic.

Apparently, Anuak-speaking Ethiopians too often look like Southern Sudanese. They tend to be originally from close to the Sudanese border, and may speak some variation of Juba Arabic plus Amharic. They are said not to be fluent in Amharic.

The phenomenon of Anuak speakers claiming Sudanese origin was reported. On the other hand, the cases of Anuak speakers who have been “accused” of being Sudanese, that is, of concealing their true identity were also reported.¹³³ They tend to speak Anuak in Cairo, although they may be able to shift to Arabic.

Harari

The three speakers of this Semitic language interviewed in Cairo spent a relatively long time in Addis Ababa. They stated that this provided for their proficiency in Amharic. They claimed knowledge of Harari as well.¹³⁴ They stated that most of Harari speakers in Cairo are Muslims who also speak Oromo and Somali. They may originally be from near the Somali border and might choose to speak Somali, if the situation requires it. Their pronunciation may be detectable, although with some difficulties, as they tend to be bilingual Harari-Somali or Harari-Oromo.

Beshangul (or Beni Shangul)

One speaker of this Nilo-Saharan language was interviewed in Cairo.¹³⁵ He also spoke Modern Standard Arabic and Amharic. He was not aware of any other Beshangul speaker in Cairo whose proficiency of Amharic was equal to his. According to him, Beshangul speakers tend to be monolingual.

¹³³ It was suggested that only the presence of a competent Ethiopian Anuak-speaking interpreter could assist in casting light on the matter.

¹³⁴ As pointed out elsewhere, one of the main obstacles encountered during the draft of this report was the impossibility of verifying the data collected. When a number of Ethiopian refugees were asked for their opinion on the presence of Harari speakers in Cairo, they all claimed that the possibility was ‘very unlikely’. They added that the number of Harari native speakers in Ethiopia is extremely low.

¹³⁵ Berta is another name for this language.

Language use

As many Ethiopians prefer not to interact with locals,¹³⁶ language shift to Egyptian Arabic rarely occurs. Learning Arabic is therefore not seen as relevant, since most Ethiopians tend to see Cairo as a transit zone. In this perspective, the role of religion plays a critical role in the Ethiopian community. Ethiopian refugees belonging to a religious community attend almost exclusively social events involving members of their respective community.¹³⁷ As a result, among Ethiopians, language (namely Amharic) may be seen as the main element of cohesion.

Shift to Egyptian Arabic, on the other hand, mostly occurs among Ethiopian women, who tend to work as housemaids in Cairo.¹³⁸ Although it has proven to be rather difficult to meet Ethiopian female refugees in Cairo,¹³⁹ the data collected seems to indicate the rapid establishment of bilingualism: Amharic or Tigrinya and Egyptian Arabic.¹⁴⁰

ERITREA

Tigrinya is the main ethnic Eritrean language. Ethiopian and Eritrean Tigrinya speakers can understand each other; however, they may differ in terms of idiomatic expressions, vocabulary, and pronunciation. The two versions of the language are mutually intelligible. The variation of Tigrinya spoken in Tigray (Ethiopia), for example, differs in terms of accent from the same language spoken in Eritrea, although the lexical similarity between the two variations appears to be up to 95%.¹⁴¹ Afar is also spoken in Eritrea.

The languages spoken by the Eritrean refugees interviewed in Cairo are:

Kunama

Kunama is a Nilo-Saharan language. It is also called Baza. A few representatives live in Cairo, whose proficiency in Tigrinya is sufficient to allow proper communication with a native Tigrinya speaker. They speak variations of Kunama such as Barka, Marda, and Bitama, which appear to be fairly mutually intelligible.

¹³⁶ The explanations given ranged from ‘for security reasons’ (I do not speak Arabic, and I had better keep a low profile) to ‘for cultural reasons’ (‘they’ are Muslim and there cannot be communication between us).

¹³⁷ The Ethiopians who attend religious places in Cairo are in most cases part of Amharic-speaking religious communities. Typically, they are Christian (Orthodox, Protestant, and Pentecostal), although a small minority of Ethiopian Muslims live in Cairo.

¹³⁸ Ethiopian workers are apparently often preferred to other nationalities by local employers, as they seem to enjoy the reputation of being clean, reliable, and hard-working. Linguistically speaking, this certainly helps them to integrate more rapidly in the Egyptian society.

¹³⁹ This was mainly due to the fact that they tend to work full time, and are very often offered accommodation by their employers.

¹⁴⁰ Some of them declared their intention to improve their Arabic even further by studying Modern Standard Arabic. This is truly a remarkable fact, given that the vast majority of them never had access to education, both in Ethiopia and in Egypt.

¹⁴¹ Tigrinya spoken in Tigray includes Amharic vocabulary.

Hijazi Arabic

Hijazi Arabic is a Semitic language spoken on the Eritrean Red Sea Coast. No information on the differences between this variation of Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic was available. One Hijazi Arabic speaker was interviewed. He was not able to provide us with relevant information on Hijazi Arabic.

Tigré

Tigré is usually spoken by refugees who are originally from the border area between Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan. Due to its name, this language is often mistaken for Tigrinya, although it is a distinct language of Semitic origin. The three speakers interviewed in Cairo were Muslim, and spoke fluent Modern Standard Arabic and English.

Italian

Only two well-educated speakers of this language were found in Cairo. They were trilingual Tigrinya-Amharic-Italian. Their proficiency in Italian is due to the fact that they had access to education in Italian from primary school to university.

Bilen

Bilen speakers are said to be originally from Central Eritrea, specifically from the town of Keren. Like Afar, this is a Cushitic language. No dialectal variations were mentioned by the five speakers identified in Cairo. One of them was Christian Catholic, and the others were Muslim. They spoke Tigrinya as a second language. Three of them only had a passive knowledge of Bilen.¹⁴²

Saho

Saho too is a Cushitic language, whose speakers interviewed were Muslims who knew Arabic and Tigrinya. The presence in Cairo of Saho who were born in Gulf Arab States who live in Cairo and speak only Arabic was mentioned.¹⁴³ The speakers interviewed in Cairo were well-educated. Their knowledge of English was good.

Amharic

Amharic does not enjoy the status of national language in Eritrea, although about 25% of Eritreans interviewed claimed fluency in this language, due to their mixed Eritrean-Ethiopian origin. Some interviewees stated that Amharic is still considered the language of the ‘colonizers’, although some others considered it as a language of prestige.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² They grew up in urban centres, and were not interested in learning their parents’ tongue.

¹⁴³ According to the Saho refugees interviewed, Saho who grew up in one of the Gulf Arab States are likely not to have any knowledge of Saho language.

¹⁴⁴ Once more there is the need to emphasise that clients and interpreters need to share the same social, cultural, and linguistic background in order to be able to communicate.

Other languages

The presence of one or more Bedawi¹⁴⁵ and Nara¹⁴⁶ speakers was mentioned, although it was not possible to identify any of them.

Language use

In terms of language attitude, no substantial differences were found between the Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees interviewed.

BURUNDI

Swahili, French, and Rundi are the languages spoken by the interviewees. Swahili is properly called Kiswahili. It is a *lingua franca*.¹⁴⁷ It is a Niger-Congo language of Bantu origin.¹⁴⁸ Rundi is properly called Kirundi. It is too Niger-Congo. Kiswahili is extensively spoken in Burundi, where the national languages are French and Kirundi. The latter was the language of primary education of the Burundian refugees interviewed.

The Burundian refugees interviewed were all Muslim Kiswahili-speaking men, although none of them appeared to have mastered Standard Swahili.¹⁴⁹ During one of these interviews, it was pointed out that the terms Swahili and Muslims are often used as synonyms in Burundi.

Language relations

According to the opinion of the refugees interviewed, if a Burundian refugee in Cairo says 'I speak Swahili', s/he may mean:

'I moved to the capital of Burundi when I was six. I am Muslim. In the capital, I learnt Swahili. I have spoken Kirundi from an early age. I also speak French. I learnt this language in school, when I was six years old. I studied in Kirundi and French. I know these two languages, although my spoken French is not very good, as I have never really spoken it on a daily basis. Ever since I moved to Cairo (three years ago), I stopped speaking French altogether, and now I realise my French has deteriorated.'

'I am a Muslim from Bujumbura, and specifically from Buyenzi. I have spoken Kiswahili from an early age. I did not have the chance to go to secondary school. I speak Kirundi as well, although I am not fluent. My French is poor. I guess I manage to communicate in French. In Cairo, I have learnt some English, and I am determined

¹⁴⁵ See note no.21.

¹⁴⁶ Nara speakers are said to be from Western Eritrea. Nara is a Nilo-Saharan, Eastern Sudanic language.

¹⁴⁷ Spoken as first or second language in Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Mayotte, Mozambique, Somalia, South Africa, and Comoros Islands.

¹⁴⁸ A group of languages spoken by Central and Southern African peoples.

¹⁴⁹ Interviews of Burundian refugees were conducted with the assistance of a teacher of Swahili language of Tanzanian origin.

to improve it. In the last three years, I have been attending a Modern Standard Arabic course at Al-Azhar University. I now know Modern Standard Arabic, and can speak some Egyptian Arabic’.

‘I come from Gitega, and specifically from Nyamugari. I am Muslim. I speak Kiswahili, Kirundi, French, and English. I studied in Kirundi and French. In the place where I am from, most people speak Kiswahili. I guess this is the language in which I can best express myself. I learnt English in the capital, and later when I travelled. In Cairo, I most speak Kiswahili and English. I do not have the chance to speak French. I have been here for two years, and I am attending a Modern Standard Arabic course at Al-Azhar University. My spoken Egyptian Arabic is not good, as I hardly interact with Egyptians.’

SIERRA LEONE

Fulfulde

The main language among Sierra Leonean interviewees was Fulfulde.

Fulfulde is a Niger-Congo language. It is also known as Fula, Fulfulde, Fellata (mainly in Sudan), and Pular. This language is spoken in several African countries, including Sudan, Congo, Liberia, Senegal, and Guinea. The spread of this language was contributed by Muslim Fula nomadic tribes, possibly originating from Nigeria.¹⁵⁰

Standard Fulfulde presents a complex and complete grammatical and syntactical structure, is very rich in vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, and – typically of *lingua franca* – has the capacity of adapting to the local linguistic reality.

In Cairo, it is taught at Cairo and Al-Azhar Universities.

Dialects

Its dialects are: Krio, Fula, and Kebu. Fulfulde language is a mixture of Arabic, French, English, and local language varieties (according to the country).

Other languages

Krio is an English-based a Creole language used in everyday life, particularly by younger generations.¹⁵¹ It is widely used as an inter-group language,¹⁵² particularly by those who do not speak English, according to the two refugees interviewed.

¹⁵⁰ Its importance as a *lingua franca* is probably not comparable to that of Swahili. This has probably to do with the fact that Swahili gained prestige after having acquired status of national language in Tanzania.

¹⁵¹ In this context, the term creole is used correctly, as it is a mother tongue formed by the contact of English with local dialects. The relationship between this language and the dialect of Fulfulde also called Krio is not clear.

¹⁵² This shows that a creole language can develop into a *lingua franca*.

Mende – this is a Niger-Congo language. Its dialects are Ko and Sewawa. According to one refugee interviewed, they are very similar to one another.

Situation in Cairo

In Cairo, there are several Fulfulde sub-communities, which find their meeting point in one inter-community organization called ‘Kawtal Janngoobe Pulaar (Fulfulde) e Leyde Arab’. The Fulfulde Educational Association in the Arab Countries deals with the teaching of Fulfulde, translation of written texts, including books (mainly from Arabic), compilation of grammar textbooks, development of specific terminology, creation of a new Fulfulde dictionary (updating the current version), and the creation of a bilingual edition of the Koran. This organization has been researching dialectal variations of Standard Fulfulde, which was established in 1955.

Language use

The great majority of Fulfulde speakers interviewed in Cairo were between 18 and 30 years old. 90% of them were men. They said that there might be around 300 Fulfulde speakers in Cairo. About 70% of them had been living in the Egyptian capital for about 10 years, 15% for longer, and the remaining for 1 to 3 years. Their level of education was relatively high. About 60% of them spoke Arabic as a second language, and tended not to be fluent in English or French, which were spoken to various degrees of fluency by the remaining 40%. They claimed that it is difficult to have access to a Fulfulde interpreter.¹⁵³ This was judged as unfortunate by most Fulfulde refugees interviewed, particularly because of the cultural and religious implications which are mirrored in the use of their language.¹⁵⁴ Code-switching was noticed among Fulfulde speakers. According to the data collected, most of Fulfulde speakers tend to be perfectly bilingual, and use code-switching to signal social and cultural distance with Egyptian Arabic speakers.¹⁵⁵

III – SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

General situation

When relatively large groups of individuals move to Cairo as a result of both forced and voluntary migration, they carry with them their linguistic heritage which may turn into a possible element of cohesion in the formation of communities. They may or may not preserve it entirely in the new environment. This could be according to

¹⁵³ In most cases, they have their interview in English, Arabic, or French.

¹⁵⁴ The practice of Islam in Sierra Leone and in Egypt differs, and issues such as sexual intercourse outside marriage, gender relations, relationship between Muslims and Christians, and family values may strain communication between a Muslim Fulfulde and an Egyptian Arabic speaker, even though they share the same language, namely Arabic. This may result in reciprocal lack of respect and mutual misunderstanding.

¹⁵⁵ Code-switching is a powerful tool. It can be used to exclude non-speakers of the language from a conversation, to insert privileged information, and to send meanings which are not accessible to all the participants in a conversation.

whether or not they know a variety of Arabic (and can cope with Egyptian Arabic), and/or their willingness to learn Egyptian Arabic, for ideological or psychological reasons. The status of the language at stake plays an important role in this process, particularly if it is linked with religion, politics, and ethnic prestige. Individuals may give up one language in favour of exclusively using more recently acquired languages or languages that improved in the new environment, specifically Arabic and/or English.

Second or possibly third generation immigrants face rather different problems, in terms of communication and interaction in Cairo. Growing up in a Sudanese or Somali family in Egypt should not in itself be source of linguistic difficulties. Many of the problems that arise, on the other hand, are the result of external social pressure. Living in a place where housing, schools, and recreational facilities are poor may give rise to social tension and rejection of the local language. Lack of access to formal teaching of Arabic may lead children to simply acquire one local variety (through playing with Egyptian children) and a passive knowledge of their parents' mother tongue, should the latter not be fluent in Arabic or determined to preserve 'their language'. The result may as well be an individual lacking those communication skills which are required in any formal context, who expresses himself by means of a language variation which may or may not be readily understandable to an interpreter. The linguistic means related to his daily experience will probably be characterised by frequent and potentially misleading code-switching, and will probably be very far from any acceptable form of bilingualism.

In Cairo, it was noticed that in certain situations language increasingly ceases to be expression of ethnic identity, to the extent that many refugees seem not to consider their ethnic language as important when seeking to access a service, and may submit to relying on their knowledge of Arabic, their second language (for example, Ethiopians and Eritreans depending on Amharic), or English. Indirectly, this appears to have a perverse impact on service providers, which often fall into the trap of assimilating all refugees into large and homogeneous groups, regardless of their ethnic and linguistic origin.

Factors influencing change

The main factors influencing patterns of language use and attitude in Cairo may be common to all the mentioned language communities, and related to

- Place of birth,
- Ethnicity/nationality,
- Environment,
- Social and educational background, and

- Social and psychological anxiety.

Sudanese refugees

Southern Sudanese refugees who claimed Sudanese Arabic as their first or second language are likely to have grown up in towns.¹⁵⁶ Southern Sudanese refugees whose mother tongue is not Arabic may acquire knowledge of the differences between Juba and Egyptian Arabic (for instance), although they never really switch to the latter. The same seems to happen with Western Sudanese refugees (Dar Fur). This may be due to an attempt to preserve their cultural identity through the use of language.

Nuba refugees may offer a completely different situation. A group of Nuba bilinguals interviewed were born outside the Nuba Mountains, and then brought back to their parents' place of origin.¹⁵⁷ They claimed to be Arabic native speakers and to speak one Nuba language fluently.¹⁵⁸

The process of 'arabization' mostly influenced Nuba and Darfurians. The relationship between being born in an urban or countryside environment in terms of claiming Arabic as mother tongue seems to correspond to the same pattern as to Southern Sudanese refugees.¹⁵⁹

Birth in town, intermarriage and/or long periods in Khartoum may also have affected the language attitude of Darfurian and Nuba Mountains refugees in Cairo, unlikely Nilotic language speakers,¹⁶⁰ who register a strong tendency to keeping their mother tongue alive. Northern Sudanese refugees have no problems to adjust themselves to the new linguistic situation offered by Cairo, particularly if they have an urban background. In this respect, it can be stated that monolingualism characterizes Arabs, and – to a lesser extent – Arabic mother tongue speakers, whereas bilingualism is mainly a feature of Nuba, Darfurians, Nilotics, and Equatorians.

Fur refugees, despite the efforts spent by the Fur Cultural Centre,¹⁶¹ are not given many opportunities to improve their Arabic. Their children tend to learn a local variety of Arabic, although they are not encouraged to do so by their parents.

¹⁵⁶ Possibly not in their place of origin.

¹⁵⁷ Mainly in Central Sudan. This occurred to a number of refugees interviewed who were born in the late sixties, and moved back home in the early seventies.

¹⁵⁸ Fluency in one Nuba language depends also on the degree of arabization achieved in their place of origin: for example, if their parents spoke mostly Arabic, their knowledge of vernacular may be passive.

¹⁵⁹ One interviewee 'confessed' that she had never officially stated she speaks a Nuba Mountains language, which she had the chance to learn despite having grown up in an urban centre. She apparently used it as some sort of secret language to communicate with close friends only.

¹⁶⁰ Reference is here made to Dinka, Shilluk, Anuak, and Bari.

¹⁶¹ The centre mainly works with Darfurians living in Agouza and Sixth of October City. It offers Fur language maintenance, English, Arabic and IT classes.

Sudanese Arabic as a common language

Sudanese refugees in Cairo often live in micro communities, sharing the living space with members of different Sudanese ethnic group. This is likely to promote the use of Sudanese Arabic in a domestic context, occasional use of ethnic language with family relations, and Sudanese or Egyptian Arabic in any other context.¹⁶² In this respect, Sudanese Arabic functions as a sort of Cairo Sudanese refugee community *lingua franca* as well as a linguistic device through which unproblematic interaction with locals can be achieved. In other words, it contributes to the consolidation of a sentiment of national identity.¹⁶³ Dinka refugees, on the other hand, do not seem to share such sentiment, and speak Sudanese and Juba Arabic only when strictly necessary. Their proficiency in these languages tends to depend on their educational background and their stay in urban centres. Literacy in Arabic among them should not be taken for granted, whereas literacy in English is more frequent.

Rejection of Arabic

Psychological resistance to Arabic-learning may be seen against the background of the idealization of the ethnic / home vernacular,¹⁶⁴ the desire to keep regional traditions and cultural practice alive within the new urban context,¹⁶⁵ the refusal of total assimilation into the Northern Sudanese culture¹⁶⁶ or into the Arab culture,¹⁶⁷ and to emphasise on religious orientation.¹⁶⁸

Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees

Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees often share apartments, although they do not seem to create whole neighbourhood like Sudanese refugees. They may speak the same language and belong to different religious communities. It was concluded that they generally retain their first or second language.

Ethiopian and Eritrean men are not given many opportunities to learn Arabic in Cairo. On the other hand, it was reported that Eritrean women have the tendency to mix their mother tongue with Egyptian Arabic, particularly if they are Tigrinya speakers. This may give room to the possible development of a new language variation in Cairo.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶² Apparently, it does not take too long to a Sudanese refugee who knows Sudanese Arabic to get used to the Egyptian variation, although the vast majority of the interviewees claimed they hardly use it. Sudanese refugees whose first language is not Arabic but speak a variation of this language tend to have acquired Sudanese Arabic in Sudan and intensified its use in Cairo. None of the Sudanese refugees interviewed was completely monolingual and claimed no knowledge of Arabic.

¹⁶³ It was noticed that ethnic division survives in Cairo among Sudanese refugees, although it is often hidden by an image of brotherhood which is offered to the outsider.

¹⁶⁴ Fur, Dinka (as well as Ethiopian and Eritrean) refugees.

¹⁶⁵ Southern Sudanese (as well as Somali and West African) refugees.

¹⁶⁶ Southern Sudanese refugees in particular.

¹⁶⁷ Southern Sudanese, Nuba (as well as Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, West African) refugees.

¹⁶⁸ Christian Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in particular.

¹⁶⁹ It would have been very interesting to collect speech-samples and carry out an analysis comparative with the mix Egyptian Arabic-English so popular among the Egyptian educated elite.

Eritrean and Ethiopian women are more affected by language shift from Amharic or Tigrinya to Egyptian Arabic than any other nationality. This is due to the nature of their usual occupation as housemaids. They work for Egyptian families. Social and labour integration is, therefore, the reason women have for choosing Egyptian Arabic.

Rejection of Arabic

Male Ethiopian or Eritrean refugees do not have many opportunities to find a job and to interact with Egyptians. They tend to retain their mother tongue, and they tend to refuse to learn Arabic. Social distance may be their reason for rejecting Egyptian Arabic.

Somali refugees

Language maintenance among Somalis is provided by domestic use only. It does not include any language teaching program, as among the Dinka,¹⁷⁰ the Darfurian, and the Fulfulde communities. The majority of Somali refugees show the tendency of remaining monolingual.

Nevertheless, a number of the Somalis refugees interviewed in Cairo who came here around 1993 appeared to have accepted bilingualism as a necessary socially linguistic tool to become fully integrated in the Egyptian society.¹⁷¹

Language shift towards Egyptian Arabic mostly affects Somali women similarly to Ethiopians and Eritreans.

Rejection of Arabic

Refusal to learning Arabic is a common feature among Somali refugees. Somalis may simply reject the idea of speaking this language, even if they know it. Language shift, particularly among young Somalis, is ideologically charged, and may lead them to favour English for rare inter-community communication, at the expense of Arabic.¹⁷²

Multilingualism

Sierra Leoneans, Burundians, Ethiopians and Eritreans tend to be bilingual, although their bilingualism is often imperfect. In the case of Burundians, monolingualism or imperfect bilingualism may occur if the refugee spent most of this life in an urban centre like Bujumbura and had no access to education.¹⁷³ Bilingualism is more frequent among refugees who went through schooling in Kirundi, and acquired

¹⁷⁰ Dinka language maintenance is conducted at the Sacred Heart Church.

¹⁷¹ They have learnt Arabic. That is, they do not see Cairo as a mere transit zone.

¹⁷² They tend, in fact, to give English much more importance, as it is regarded as a language of prestige. The fact that the vast majority of them are Muslim does not seem to matter as much as for other national / ethnic groups. Although Somalis may perceive the importance of Arabic as the Muslims' holy language, they reject it for being the language of the Arabs, from whom they want to differentiate.

¹⁷³ In Bujumbura, you can apparently find the largest concentration of Kiswahili-speaking Muslims in Burundi today.

French.¹⁷⁴ While the Sierra Leonians interviewed appeared to be perfectly bilingual¹⁷⁵ regardless of their ethnic origin and place of birth, most of the Ethiopians interviewed who claimed to speak more than one language tended to have an imperfect knowledge of their second language.¹⁷⁶

Multilingualism posed the question of why young refugees – no matter what language community they belong to – seem to be less multilingual than older refugees. This could be seen as the result of having directly experienced intense ‘arabization’ (in Southern Sudan), and lack of education (in Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea). As for Sudan, it is not infrequent to meet refugees whose knowledge of their mother tongue is passive, specifically Nuba, Dinka, Nubians, and Darfurians who grew up and lived with their parents in Central Sudan or in Cairo.

In the light of the data collected, it was concluded that the dominant use of Arabic in Cairo does not lead to a better proficiency in this language, and that few refugees learn a new language in Cairo. The refugees interviewed in Cairo may

- Retain their mother tongue or equivalent, remaining monolingual (Somalis);¹⁷⁷
- Retain their mother tongue or equivalent and strengthen their English (Somali, Burundians);¹⁷⁸
- Retain their mother tongue and acquire Modern Standard Arabic and/or Egyptian Arabic (Burundians);
- Retain their mother tongue and strengthen their Arabic (Sierra Leonians);¹⁷⁹
- Intermarry and strengthen their Arabic (Southern Sudanese, Nuba);
- Retain and promote maintenance of their mother tongue or equivalent but not strengthen their Arabic (Dinka, Fur, Bari), and
- Neglect their mother tongue or equivalent in favour of Amharic and strengthen their English (Ethiopians).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ The Burundians interviewed were imperfectly trilingual.

¹⁷⁵ Krio and English, Mende and English, Krio and Fulfulde, Krio plus Fulfulde plus English. A very few cases of quadrilingualism Krio-Fulfulde-English-French were found.

¹⁷⁶ Amharic, in most cases, which they acquired after moving to Addis Ababa. Cases of perfect bilingualism are far more frequent among non-Amhara who went to school before the foundation of the Federal Republic.

¹⁷⁷ The vast majority of Somali refugees in Cairo are actually said to be monolingual.

¹⁷⁸ The ‘Somali Club’ in Cairo offers English language teaching to Somali nationals. Burundians may have the opportunity to practice their English at Al-Azhar campus among those students whose proficiency of Arabic does not allow interaction.

¹⁷⁹ It was not made clear whether the Sierra Leonian interviewed had a knowledge of Arabic language which went beyond knowing the Arabic script at arrival in Cairo.

¹⁸⁰ Without strengthening their Amharic, since the only courses available in town are offered at the Institute for African

Child refugees

In Cairo, children's acquisition of Egyptian Arabic corresponds to a process of socialization, rather than schooling, given the near impossibility of most refugee children to accessing any form of formal education. Many parents, mostly from non-Arabic speaking communities, tend to say they would like their children to learn their vernacular, in order to

- establish a tie with their origin (Nuba, Fur, Equatoria);
- be able to communicate with them, should they not speak Arabic or likely to move to an English-speaking country (Nuba, Somali, Ethiopians, Eritreans); and
- defend their culture from the process of 'arabization' (Equatoria, Dinka).

Sudanese Muslim parents interviewed, on the other hand, prefer Arabic for their children. The following are the reasons they gave:

- It is the language of the majority in Cairo;
- It is the language of education; and
- It is the language of the Koran.

Conclusion on language use

It could be concluded that the major changes in language use due to the Cairo urban environment are the following:

- Egyptian Arabic, learnt as a second language, may become dominant;
- 'Arabization' of children;
- Deterioration of passive knowledge of parents' language;
- Refusal to adopt Egyptian or Modern Standard Arabic through idealization of ethnic language;
- Gradual adoption of English through partial dismissal of ethnic language;

- Recession of vernacular because of psychological anxiety; and
- Strengthening of vernacular use because of psychological anxiety.

Communication through an interpreter

Differences in language use and language variation develop because of a number of factors, mainly geographical, historical, ethnic, cultural and social. They should be taken into significant consideration by anyone whose main task is to establish communication with a displaced person. This report is to be seen against this background, and in the light of promoting efficient communication, particularly with the assistance of a qualified and trained interpreter.¹⁸¹

Problematic

Service providers often gather information about their clients' ethnic background and disregard their linguistic background. It is useful to enquire about the language(s) they speak.¹⁸² The key questions could be:

What's your mother tongue?

Do you speak it fluently?

If not, what language did you speak from an early age?

Are you bilingual?¹⁸³

Do you speak this language(s) on a daily basis?

If not, for how long have you not spoken it?¹⁸⁴

Competence of interpreters

Cultural misunderstandings and incompetence of interpreters have been indicated as the main cause of miscommunication between interviewers and asylum seekers. A failure to understand correctly what someone is saying because of culture differences has an impact on the way one perceives and describes the world. Since cultural misunderstandings may even occur between two persons who speak the same language, it should be regarded as important to identify them when they happen between speakers of more than one language.

¹⁸¹ At the time of this research, a program for training community interpreters in Cairo was being further developed at the American University in Cairo.

¹⁸² This is a very delicate process, as refugees sometimes believe that interviewers want to know about this in order to cross-question them by asking what language they speak, to find out if they are trying to hide something related to their origin.

¹⁸³ Bilingual does not simply mean that someone is able to speak two languages: it implies equal fluency in the two languages.

¹⁸⁴ The same questions should be asked of the interpreter prior to the interview, making sure that the interpreter is going to translate a language s/he is perfectly fluent in (native speaker level).

Untrained interpreters are likely to fail to acknowledge the difference between strict interpreting and giving advice; ‘helping’ the client by adding and/or omitting according to what they think the client should or should not say in order to be recognized; attempting to colour the translation, because they identify themselves with the client’s narrative or simply attempting to adapt it to some known community ‘collective story’ which has proven to be successful in the past; failing to pass information on to the client given by the interviewer, should this be ‘bad news’ for him/her; and, perhaps above all, failing to respect the rules of confidentiality.

If service providers had access to trained interpreters, communication could be improved by making sure that the interpreter is going to interpret in a language s/he is perfectly fluent (native speaker level). The interpreter should – prior to the interview – be informed of the client’s gender as well as her/his socioeconomic background, and, particularly, whether s/he is originally from a town or a rural area. The interviewer should make sure that the interpreter knows the dialect which the client may have only partial knowledge. This is of the paramount importance, as anyone is likely to mix (to a certain extent, and perhaps unconsciously) a country’s dominant or national language with *a* local dialect spoken where they grew up or where they spent a very long time. Sometimes, even variation in the pronunciation can be dangerously misleading.

During the interview, the interviewer should make a serious effort to speak slowly and clearly. Clarification should be allowed at all times, particularly to prevent the phenomena of ‘pronominal reversal’ (meaning where the interpreter fails to translate exactly what the client is saying, but rather says, for example, ‘He says....’), which has been seen as a dangerous obstacle to the communication process.

It may be that the interpreter is hearing a story which he recognizes as very similar to what he personally experienced. This has an impact on the interview, may cause momentary wonder at what ‘character of the story’ is actually speaking, and may cause confusion when the interviewer reads through the testimony. This is particularly true when many different people are involved in the narration and the number of potential ‘he’ and ‘she’ increases.

There is also the phenomenon of ‘normalization’ to be considered, of which the interpreter may be guilty. Sometimes the interpreter – perhaps unconsciously – does not regard as important the disclosure of information regarding what happened to the client, because believes it is not worth mentioning or because it is so ‘normal’ back home or has become ‘normal’ to the interviewing situation.

None of the parties should engage in ‘private’ conversation, in order to avoid suspicion and mistrust. If it is a complementary interview, and the interpreter did not

attend the first part, the interviewer should brief him on the case subject, particularly with reference to potentially sensitive issues.¹⁸⁵

Since the general trend in Cairo is faith in word-by-word translation as the best way to achieve accuracy and neutrality in translation, it should here be pointed out that the efficient translation and interpreting of specific terminology, culture-specific concepts, semantically-complex words, idioms, and idiomatic expressions, requires the ability to speak in a language which is readably understandable to each of the parties in an interview.¹⁸⁶ In other words, it shows where linguistic ability and cultural knowledge intersect.

¹⁸⁵ Rape, sexually related matters, and tortures inflicted on genitals may be among the most common emotionally-loaded subjects.

¹⁸⁶ Interpreters should be encouraged to develop their own glossary. This would be a formidable tool, which would enable them to overcome the problem of being subjected to rapid decision making when interpreting cultural concepts.

IV - APPENDIX

Terminology used in this report

Bilingualism: the ability of speaking two languages with an equal degree of fluency

Code-switching: the use of two or more linguistic varieties within the same conversation

Communication: the successful transfer of information to others

Culture-specific concept: words expressing concepts which are totally unknown in the target language

Dialect: form of a language which contains some different words, grammar and pronunciation the way in which words are said from other forms of the same language

First language: mother tongue or equivalent

Idiomatic expression: frozen patterns of language which carry meanings that cannot be deduced from their individual components

Intelligibility: ability of a language to be comprehensible to speakers of another language

To interpret: to express something that has just been said in a different language so that people who do not speak each other's languages can understand each other

Language maintenance: the process of keeping a language alive in an environment dominated by another language

Language shift: the process of gradually disregarding one's language in favour of another language (possibly a dominant language)

Lexical similarity: equality in terms of words between two or more language or dialects

Lingua franca: a language common to speakers whose native languages are different. The number of loanwords in a *lingua franca* is usually far greater than in a vernacular

Literacy: the ability to read and write

Loanword (or borrowing): a word adopted and adapted from a foreign language.
'Loanword' itself is a loanword: it comes from the German *lehnwort*

Mother tongue or equivalent: one's native language, that is, the dominant language spoken from an early age. In this respect, a native speaker is someone who has spoken a language from an early age

Passive knowledge of *a* language: capacity to understand a language for having been exposed to it. It implies limited ability to speak the language

Second language: language acquired at a later stage, whose degree of fluency is not equal to the first language

Semantically-complex word: words expressing a complex set of meanings

Semantic confusion: choice of words whose meaning is similar to those which should be employed

Syntax: the arrangement of words in a sentence which shows their logical connection and relation

To translate: to change words into a different language

Vernacular: the language of one's native group, region, or country

Chart of the languages mentioned in this report

AFRO-ASIATIC

SEMITIC

WEST SEMITIC

ETHIOPIAN: Tigrinya, Amharic, Gurage, Tigré, and Harari

CENTRAL SEMITIC Egyptian, Sudanese, and Fur Arabic

CREOLE (ARABIC BASED) Juba Arabic

NILO-SAHARAN

ETHIOPIAN: Beni Shangul and Kunama (Baza)

EASTERN SUDANIC: Zaghawa, Masalit, Tama, Fur, Ama, Ajan, Gumuz, Kawali, Gbaya, Berti, Birked, Mahas, Dongola, and Nara

NILOTIC: Dinka, Shilluk, Nuer, Bari (Beri), Anuak, Kakwa, and Mabān

MORU-MADI: Moru, Madi, and Ma'di

NIGER-CONGO

ADAMAWA-UBANGI: Moro, Bari (Bai), Zande, Kadugli, and Ndogo

FULA-WOLOF: Fulfulde (Fulani)

BANTU: Swahili and Rundi

NORTH-WESTERN: Mende

CUSHITIC

Bedawi, Mahatiri, Maay, Dabarre, Garre, Afar, Oromo, Bilen, and Saho

CHADIC

Hausa

INDO-EUROPEAN

GERMANIC

English

ROMANCE

Italian and French

CREOLE (ENGLISH BASED)

Krio