

Scene 8 or 107?

**Amjad Abu Nseir**

**University of Texas At Austin**  
**boulder@ccwf.cc.utexas.edu**

**The Dom Language contact with Arabic**  
**A case of language change and Language Death**

**0. Introduction:**

The treatment of languages as isolated and self contained, and the linguistic changes as internally motivated is a downright misrepresentation, since the majority of the world speakers are probably at least bilingual, trilingual or multilingual and therefore we have a case of language contact.

In language contact situations, linguistic elements can be transferred from one language to another. Languages with powerful or great number of speakers can influence speakers of less powerful languages or languages with smaller number of speakers. The understanding of such transference and such influence is vital to the study of both the recipient and the donor languages and to the general understating of human language. Due to language contact, languages could change, shift, or ultimately die. In this paper I will discuss the issue of language contact between the Indian language of Dom, spoken by the Dom of Jordan and Jordanian Arabic. The paper will address the issues of lexical borrowing, language change, the overall status of the language and what has to be done to preserve the language.

for pocket - Dom

**1. Languages under discussion:**

The Dom is the language spoken by a small minority group in Jordan. The group under investigation gathers in small pockets of families in the city of Madaba, Amman and the Jordan Valley. These families have strong ties with the Dom of Jerusalem. The Dom refers to their language as "DOM" and therefore I will be referring to it as such. The number of Dom speakers in Jordan according to my personal fieldwork does not exceed the 300 to 500 people (a complete and official count will be conducted soon). The Dom in Jordan are either nomad who still live in the skirts of the cities or settled ones. Being

nomads is one of the reasons that make obtaining an exact number of speakers a hard one. The paper will be concerned with those settled groups in the above-mentioned cities.

Living in Jordan where the majority of speakers use Arabic as their daily life means of communication, and more specifically Jordanian Arabic, the Dom language found itself in a circle where the speakers either have to use their language or to use the language spoken by the majority and that is Jordanian Arabic. But do the Dom have a choice? In the following paragraphs, I will try to provide a brief answer of what the status of the Dom language is and their choice of language when they communicate both among themselves and with other members of the community. Knowing their choice of language then will lead to what the status of the Dom language is and How Jordanian Arabic has influenced it linguistically.

## **2. Speakers:**

The Dom population according to my current survey is divided into three generations of speakers. The elders, the middle aged speakers and the new generation. Using the Dom language is only limited to in Dom community communication. Dom in general prefers not to use their language either to communicate with the Jordanians or to communicate among themselves in front of the Jordanians. In fact, most Jordanians do not know that the Dom have a language and most of those who knows the Dom have a language consider it to be a secret non sense means of communication. The Dom in Jordan are socially marked and the members of the community are aware of this. By socially marked I mean that the Dom are considered to be low in the social scale. The reasons briefly are: First, the Jordanian's lack of knowledge of the Dom's history, origin and language, secondly, the Dom's preference to live in closed communities which makes the Jordanians think of them as inferiors. Thirdly, the different culture the Dom have which includes habits and customs different from that of the Jordanian community.

Such marking hinders the Dom members' ability to use their language and speeds the Dom's language change and at a certain point it might lead to its death as we will discuss below. The reason I mentioned the generations above is that the choice of language, whether to use Dom or Arabic, heavily relays on age. Old members of the Dom community speak the Dom language fluently and the reason is that in the Dom

community those elders do not go to work but stay at home. The number of those elder decreases by year and therefore their loss means the loss of an old form of the language. The middle-aged generation is less fluent than the elder and they maintain their fluency through the communication with the elders. Through their daily contact with the Jordanians, the middle-aged speakers brought so many Arabic words into the Dom language which I will discuss below. The two generations of the elderly and the middle aged are very important to the study of the Dom language. The former is to study the pure and old forms of the language and the latter to study the influence of Arabic through their daily contact. Finally, The new generation according to my personal observation is reluctant to use the language. This new generation is in fact is as important as the other two generations since they are the new carriers of the language. Due to the social marking, the new generation refuses to use The Dom even in Dom community interaction.

I have personally discussed the issue with a young Dom who showed his lack of interest to speak the language. His answer why is expected and that is " We no longer need to use The Dom language. We are Arabs and therefore we have to use Arabic. We need to get rid of being marked and live as normal people." We clearly see that there is a very dangerous sign of loss. In fact, not only the loss of the language, but also the loss of identity to achieve one goal and that is social integration and social assimilation. From the above discussion we can see that there is also a factor of power and prestige involved in the choice of language. New generation as well as middle-aged ones looks at Arabic to be the prestigious language since it is the medium of communication in the market place and the language of daily life interaction.

### **3. Language Contact:**

Since some of the elderly and all middle aged speakers use Arabic to communicate with the Jordanians and to the new generation of the Dom, Arabic has a heavy impact on the Dom language in most of its aspects, that is phonologically, syntactically, morphologically and lexically. Due to the limitation of time and space, I will only discuss the influence of Arabic on the Dom lexically. In fact, studies show that a heavy lexical invasion from a donor language could also influence the other aspects of

(must want to ...)

the recipient language. The Donor language in this case is Arabic (hence DL) and the Recipient language is the Dom language (hence RL).

### 3.1 Lexical borrowing:

In most cases of language contact, languages tend to borrow from each other. In the case of Arabic and The Dom language there is a one way borrowing. That is from Arabic into the Dom language and not visa versa. "The term borrowing is a fairly recent label for what used to be called 'mixing of languages'. We shall follow Haugen here in using the term borrowing for 'the attempted reproduction in one language of patterns previously found in another' (1950:212), restricting ourselves to the lexicon. Of course, as Haugen notes, the donor need not be aware of the loan and does not consent to it, while the recipient need not repay it; but since alternative metaphors, like stealing or adoption, are at least equally absurd, we shall stick to borrowing." (McMahon, 1994: 200)

The questions I seek to address here are: why do the Dom borrow, what did they borrow, and how this borrowing influences their language.

#### 3.1.1 The need:

As we have noted above that the Dom were a nomadic population and in recent years some of them have settled down in big cities. The need to get accustomed to the urban life requires that the Dom borrow certain words that they did not use to have as part of their nomadic style of life. The need to understand and express new cultural and religious aspects of the Jordanian community forced the Dom to borrow cultural and religious expression to be able to communicate and express themselves efficiently. They have borrowed these expressions to fill in the gap found in their language which will enable them to address themselves to each other in a way that simplifies communication.

#### 3.1.2 What is being borrowed:

The Dom have borrowed so many words from Arabic and mostly the following:

- A. Cultural expressions
- B. Religious expression
- C. Terms related to agriculture
- D. Terms related to modern life technology
- E. Terms related to education
- F. Words related to the sea.

### 3.1.3 The influence:

We can see that the Dom language has no contact with either its mother or sister languages and therefore its ability to equip itself with new vocabulary or maintain its vocabulary is weak. It is the duty of the speakers to be aware of the fact that maintaining the vocabulary is their first priority. Most speakers according to my observations are not aware of this fact and sometimes they do not mind replacing the vocabulary with those from the donor language.

### Conclusion:

The observation that the new Dom generation is not willing to carry and maintain their language puts the language in a very critical position in which a serious effort is required to do the following:

1. Maintain the language through detailed linguistic documentation and no attempts have been made in the Dom community in Jordan.
2. Educate the community about the importance of maintaining, and transferring the language from one generation to another.
3. Educate the majority of Jordanians about the Dom's language, history and culture.
4. Educate the rest of the linguistic scholars that studying and maintaining an endangered language is as important as studying a powerful language.

Replace vs. gap

linguists duty to educate  
for your purpose

**References:**

Haugen, Einar (1950) 'The analysis of linguistic borrowing.' *Language* 26: 210-31.

MacMahon April (1994) *Understanding Language change*. Cambridge University press.