

Reflections by Caroline Roset

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I started as a PhD candidate of the ACLC in September 2011 with the project A Grammar of Darfur Arabic. I combine my part-time PhD project with my part-time job as a teacher in the Arabic Department. My main occupations since September 2011 until now were preparations for my first fieldwork trip from December 2011 until March 2012. I first followed courses on phonetics and on software for language documentation (DOBES, Nijmegen), made a short field work trip to Birmingham where many speakers of Darfur Arabic can be found, and I explored publications on linguistic fieldwork, Sudanese and Chadian Arabic. Furthermore, I made other practical preparations like establishing and maintaining Sudanese contacts in Sudan and Europe, arranging visa and flight, and acquiring suitable hardware and software.



During this period, I recorded seven interviews with Darfurians living in the Netherlands and Birmingham, England, and transcribed parts of them. So far, hypotheses put forward in my project proposal on phonological features seem to be valid: the 'typical' Arabic pharyngeals and pharyngealised phonemes seem indeed to have disappeared from this dialect, they are pronounced 'weaker' or merge with other phonemes.

On a sociolinguistic level, the language situation in Darfur seems even more heterogeneous than expected and is changing rapidly. Drought and war have recently enhanced large-scale migrations. Together with the increasing influence from the Sudanese capital Khartoum over the last decades, these factors seem to strengthen the position of Arabic. Arabic is not only spoken as a lingua franca, a pidgin or L1 according to tribe or place of origin, but as any of them by Darfurians of all descents (except Baggara Arabs probably). For example, a Darfurian from the Fur tribe, who might be assumed to speak the Fur language as L1 and Arabic as L2, might in reality be a L1-speaker of Arabic and hardly speak any Fur. But the opposite might also occur, and anything in between. This also holds for other, originally African tribes in Darfur.

In spite of the recent and partly ongoing civil war in Darfur and hence increased awareness and pride of African roots and resentment against Arabs, Arabic appears to be the language of prestige (Standard Arabic as the written language and Khartoum Arabic as the spoken language). Since Sudan's independence from England in 1956, Arabic is the language of education, the language of the capital and the media and the language of the Darfurians who want to become anything else than a farmer or a cattle breeder.

At the moment of writing, I am performing my field research in Khartoum, the capital of North Sudan. I collect my data via elicitation as well as speech recordings, which I transcribe and analyse together with my main informant, a PhD-student in Arts from al-Fashir, the capital of Darfur. Unfortunately, my travel permit to Darfur has been



refused by the Sudanese authorities for security reasons. However, many Darfurians moved to Khartoum in the past years so I can collect data here. Most of them adapt to the dominant Khartoum Arabic in apparently a couple of months, but a few elder Darfurians who have not settled here since long, maintain their Darfurian colloquial.

It is not easy to find these basilect speakers, since they are not as numerous as the linguistically adapted Darfurians, they do not get out of their homes as much and they live in the (poorer) suburbs. The challenge of getting hold of these Darfurians is reinforced by the Sudanese themselves, who generally find it strange and difficult to understand that I am interested in the 'broken' Arabic (as they call it themselves) of

Darfur, which they generally look down on. Explaining my interest is time consuming and sometimes results in misunderstandings, but it is all the more rewarding when I manage to meet a 'steadfast' native speaker. I have made a couple of hours of recordings among these elder Darfurians, so far only women. They unanimously seem to be strong persons and are extremely kind, relaxed, generous and cheerful, like most Sudanese I met so far. This makes the recording not only rewarding but also fun!