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**Ibn Khaldoun In The  
Context of Contemporary  
Sociolinguistics**

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**Abstract :**

This paper attempts to show that Ibn Khaldun (b.1332), a pioneer in the historical and sociological sciences, has expounded with great insight many aspects of language. His discussions in The Muqaddimah (an introduction to history, 1377) about situations in which language functions and the degree to which 'meaning' is determined by 'situation' are reminiscent of Firth, Hyme and contemporary variationists (e.g. Labov and Baily). They constitute a real contribution to sociolinguistics. Firth's 'context of situation' and its impact on contemporary approaches to language are briefly discussed and exemplified. Ibn Khaldun's views on meaning, situation, spread of situation, natural speech and artistic embellishments are presented.

**1- Firth's sociolinguistic categories and the contemporary scene.**

1.1 In many of his articles (e.g.1952 a "Palmer 1968", 12-15; 1956, 97) Firth makes the point that the object of linguistic analysis is to make statements of meaning.

He argues that to attain this end linguistic theory should "humanize and personalize" utterance (Firth 1952 b, 7), i.e. place linguistic texts with all their characteristics in their contexts of situation which are situational as well as verbal. The functions of linguistic texts are thus explained in relation to such sociolinguistic categories as interlocutors, biographies, classes, sex, age group, 'relevant non-verbal behaviour', occupation, etc. All such categories contribute to our knowledge of meaning.

Moreover, this situational level (concerned with 'exterior relations in texts') determines collocability (concerned with 'interior relations in texts') in any given text (Mitchell 1975, 185). Collocations (i.e. words and other elements in habitual company) are attested in contexts of situation. Such statements of meaning are different from a verbal or referential definition and much more exact (Firth 1952 b, 7). To exemplify this argument let us consider the use of the term 'Hagga'<sup>(1)</sup> in cultivated vernacular Egyptian Arabic.

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- 1) Brief conventions for reading the transcribed material as follows. Consonant Letters: S,Z, Voiceless and voiced palato-alveolar fricatives; r,an alveolar flap, rr,an alveolar roll; x, voiceless and voiced uvular fricatives; H,9 voiceless uvular plosive;ʔ glottal plosive; S,T,D,Z 'emphatic' consonants, corresponding to 'non-emphatic' s,t,d,z, respectively. Vowel Letters: a,a, front and back open vowels; e,o, mid- to half-close front and back vowels, spread and rounded respectively. Long vowels are indicated by doubling the appropriate vowel letter (ii, ee, aa, aa, uu).

Originally 'Hagga' was a title given to a woman who had made the pilgrimage to 'Al Higaz' (the Holy Land in Saudi Arabia). In the following attested examples it collocates with.

- (a) the nominal xalti and the definite article;
- (b) the nominal xalti, the definite article and a proper name which is a variable element;
- (c) the nominal mooma and the definite article;
- (d) the nominal sitt (with or without the definite article) and the definite article;
- (e) the vocative article ya (preposed).

### Examples:

- (1) ? izzayyik ya xalti lHagaa (how are you, madam?)
- (2) ?a9taqid xalti lHagga Fatma tiigi min ilbalad bukra (I think my aunt Fatma will come back from the village tomorrow)
- (3) Kunt 9andi maama lHagga (I was visiting my grandmother)
- (4) ?ahlan 9ali ?izzay issett ilHagga nnaharda (Hello Ali, how is your mother today?).
- (5) i. ba?uul ?ee ya Hagga Hanaakul?ee nnaharda (I say mother, what are we going to eat today?)  
ii. ya Hagga maysaHHis il9amaayil di ba?a tbiigi ssaay magsuus (oh hagga, it is unfair! you a hagga and selling adulterated tea?)

The following table shows how (?il)Hagga acquires meaning depending on the interrelationship of interlocutors, the context of situation, and speech function:

Cllocation	Function	Context
1) xalti IHagga	Reverence	Speaker is neighbour or friend to the addressee, younger than her, of the same status, but not related to her by blood.
2) xalti IHagga faTma	Normal respect to one's real aunt.	Used by males and females when they address or refer to their aunt who has really made the pilgrimage to Mecca.
3) maama IHagga	Endearment	In some families daughters and sons call their grandmother not sitti but moomo IHagga.
4) ?issitt ilHagga	Consideration for age; respect.	Used in rather formal situations between strangers or distant friends, as mamtak or ?ommak are used only between intimate friends.
5) i.ya Hagga	To sound familiar.	The addresser is younger than the addressee and of the same status. If the addresser is older, then the addressee is a real Hagga and status is irrelevant. It is also a way of addressing one's elderly mother.
ii.ya Hagga (with emphasis)	Denial	The addressee is a real Hagga who ought to abide by the faith. In behaving otherwise, the addresser rebukes her through emphasis and intonation.

1.2 This Firthian approach to language (proposed in the 1930's in e.g. Firth 1935) is perhaps behind contemporary approaches to language where considerable attention is paid to "cotextualization" or "context of situation". In a number of such approaches, prominence is given to 'socially realistic linguistics' (Labov 1972), 'human linguistics' (Lakoff 1972), 'functions of speech' (Hyme 1969), the 'social interpretation of language and meaning' (Halliday 1978), and 'functions of language' (Halliday 1973). The concern of all these models is with language and its function in society, the use of language 'appropriately' in relation to the context in which it is used (Hyme 1971, 281). An examination of the work of certain linguists who have studied some of the ways in which speech community is heterogeneous reveals much of the same concerns. A few of the salient concepts are: diglossia (Ferguson 1959), polylectal grammar (Bailey 1973), segmentation of the speech continuum into basilect, acrolect and mesolect (Bickerton 1975), the linguistic spectrum (Le Page 1966), post-creole speech communities (Decamp 1974), bilingual communities and extra-linguistic behaviour (Rubin 1968). They share the following with Firthianism:

- (1) Monosystemic assumptions about language are fallacious; a general theory of language must cater for the interaction of linguistic means and social meaning. It must embody "diversity of speech, repertoires, ways of

speaking, and choosing among them" (Hymes 1972, 40).

- (2) The study "of the functions of language in its social context (Bialek 1973, 22) is fundamental to linguistics.
- (3) In describing and analyzing the patterns of use of languages and dialects within a specific culture, special attention should be paid to "the forms of 'speech events'; the interrelations of speaker, addressee, audience, topic, channel, and setting; and the ways in which the speakers draw upon the resources of their language to perform certain functions" (Labov 1972, 184)

## **2- Ibn Khaldun's linguistic insights**

The aim of this section is not to suggest that Ibn Khaldun's views on language have influenced recent approaches to language analysis but just to make the point that they, in some measure, foreshadowed them by several centuries.

Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (born in Tunis) became a chief *cadi* in Cairo. As an intellectual and a writer, his greatest achievement is a history of the Islamic world, a most influential book especially renowned for its lengthy introduction (*Muqaddimah*, 1377). Though the subject of language (and literature) is briefly discussed in the *Muqaddimah*, what Ibn Khaldun has to say is none the less peculiarly in harmony with the basic principles of the above-mentioned contemporary approaches to language. The

following is a brief sketch of Ibn Khaldun's views on language.

## 2.1 Meaning and context

For Ibn Khaldun, any linguistic statement at any level (morphological, lexical, syntactic, contextual) is a statement of meaning. Language is, in essence, the "expression by a speaker of his intention" (Muq "addimah" 320). The speaker's linguistic means are his mind, tongue and the "sciences concerned with (the Arabic) language" namely: grammar, syntax and style (bayaan). A speaker who has internalized his mother tongue, has "possessed a perfect (linguistic) habit" (Muq. 342) and is thus able to express the ideas he wants to express. His 'meaning' is possible only if he observes "the form of composition that makes his speech conform to the requirements of the situation" (Muq. 342) i.e. if he observes the necessary relationship between linguistic form and its function in context. If the speaker fails to employ his linguistic means in harmony with context, his "speech is like 'dead land' ( ?ard mawaat) which does not count" (Muq. 399).

## 2.2 The spread of the situation (bisaaT al-Haal)

BisaaT al-Haal is Ibn Khaldun's context of situation (see 1.1). He establishes its features on categories which are verbal and non-verbal. For him language has effect or

meaning only if it satisfies the "requirements of the situation" (Muq. 399) Thus an utterance is best viewed as having two interdependent parts, verbal and contextual. Any "word combinations" unable to satisfy "the requirements of a given situation because of some defect in the rules governing the vowel endings or the rules governing the ideas" belong in the category "dead land". Knowledge of the conditions and laws governing the conformity of word combinations to the requirements of the situation is the essence of eloquence (Muq. 399). The 'condition' and 'laws' are deduced from the mother tongue and serve as "a sort of rules" (Ibid.). The text must be kept in the focus of attention with all its syntactic features (which may be earlier or later position, implicit or explicit reference, statements used restricted or absolute, etc.) which are justified by the requirements of a given situation "and the persons discoursing with each other". The purpose of indicating a syntactic relationship is part of "the (purpose of) indicating the situations that envelop that relationship" (Ibid.). Therefore, it is through form that a linguist is able to show the relevance of situation to linguistic behaviour.

### **2.3 Constituents of the situation**

Ibn Khaldun gives the following broad and general categories for establishing the relevant features of situation:

#### **(a) linguistic context**



- (b) social context
- (c) speaker
- (d) agent (or addressee)
- (e) action

Form and meaning are interdependent. Nouns, verbs and particles indicate the speaker's perception (tosowwur) regarding individual words. Change of vowel endings and the forms of the words indicate the speaker's distinction between (a) grammatical function (b) tenses (Muq. 333). All this belongs to grammar (?alnaHw). The situation is extra-linguistic and remains to be indicated in the form of "the conditions of speakers and agents and the requirements of the situation under which the action takes place" (Muq. 333).

This is part of the facts

"because it completes the information to be conveyed. If the speaker is able to bring out these facts, his speech conveys everything that it can possibly convey" (Ibid.).

If the situation is not indicated the result is again "dead land". The Arabs "have a particular expression for each situation, in addition to a perfect use of vowel endings and clarity. "Thus one is justified in saying that according to Ibn Khaldun 'expression' (or form) and situation are mutually expectant (as they are in, say, Firth).

Ibn Khaldun provides the following example to show how

sentences which are grammatically the same acquire different meanings according to different situations. The following sentences:

Zayd is standing

زید قائمٌ

Behold, Zayd is standing

إن زیداً قائمٌ

Behold, Zayd is indeed standing

إن زیداً لقائمٌ

are "alike as far as vowel endings are concerned". Yet the meaning of each sentence is different. The first sentence, without the emphatic particle, informs an addressee who has no previous knowledge as to whether Zayd is standing or not. The second sentence, with the emphatic particle 'behold', informs a person who hesitates whether he should acknowledge the fact of Zayd's standing or not. And the third informs a person who persists in denying the fact of Zayd's standing (Muq. 333-34). What is meant by any sentence at any time is determined by the situation we are in.

## 2.4 Natural speech

"Natural speech is not just speaking, it is the type of speech that conveys the intended meaning in good performance. The speaker shows his eloquence or competence when he speaks in perfect conformity to the requirements of the situation. The speaker who uses natural speech wants to convey what is in his mind to the listeners in a complete and definite way (muq. 401). He may then use different kinds of artistic embellishment. These include the following among others: the ornamental

use of rhymed prose, the use of phrases of identical structure at the end of successive cola (muwaazanah), allusion, homonym, antithesis. The use of such embellishments give "brilliance to speech and pleasure to the ear, "all in addition to indicating the meaning (Muq. 402).

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## ابن خلدون والنظريات اللغوية الحديثة

هذه الدراسة تلقي الضوء على دور ابن خلدون الريادي في بناء ما يسمى حالياً بعلم اللغة الاجتماعي، وتبين كيف أن ماتناوله ابن خلدون بالبحث إنما يبرز جوهر ماتوصلت إليه الدراسات اللغوية الحديثة عند كثير من علماء الغرب أمثال هايم وغيرث ولاباف وبيلي وهالي داي.

اهتم ابن خلدون في مقدمته (٧٩٧هـ - ١٣٧٧م) بسياق الكلام ومقتضى الحال أو الموقف اللغوي بكل جوانبه ويشتمل ذلك على عدة عناصر منها المتكلم والمخاطب والمكان والحدث ذاته والسياق اللغوي والاجتماعي، ثم الظروف اللغوية وغير اللغوية المحيطة بكل ذلك، إن "معنى" مايقال إنما تحدده هذه العناصر مجتمعة (انظر الجزء الثاني من البحث).

وجدير بنا أن نتنبه إلى أن هذا المفهوم إنما يساير الدراسات اللغوية المعاصرة؛ ولذلك فإن هذا البحث يتناول في جزئه الأول ماتحدث عنه فيرث باسم "محتوى الموقف اللغوي" وتأثير ذلك على الدراسات اللغوية في أمريكا وخاصة بما يتعلق وأعمال مجموعة اللغويين المهتمين بتغيير دلالة مايقال على حسب اختلاف الموقف والسياق.

والهدف من هذا البحث هو بيان أن مقالته ابن خلدون منذ عدة قرون لا يختلف في جوهره عن النظريات الحديثة في النصف الثاني من القرن العشرين.