ROCZNIK ORIENTALISTYCZNY, T. LVII, Z. 2, 2004, (s. 91–97)

ELŻBIETA GÓRSKA

Characteristic Features of the Middle Arabic Language in the Texts of the Florentine Council (1442)

Abstract

The paper contains an analysis of the phenomenon of the Middle Arabic characters that appear in the Arabic version of the *Bulla unionis Coptorum*. The *Bulla* constitutes a part of the Florentine Council texts originating from the 11th session; it is dated 4 February 1442 and concerns the unification of the Copt with the Roman Catholic Church. The paper demonstrates some characteristic features of the language of the text in question, the features that testify to the interference between the spoken and literary registers. These features can be observed in, above all, the syntactic and morphological spheres, but also – in a number of cases – in the phonological and lexical ones. The detailed analysis of the language preserved in the 15th century text makes up a contribution to the studies in the Middle Arabic, a field exploited by scholars on a rather limited scale.

*

Middle Arabic constitutes a functional variety of the Arabic language, which came into being as a result of the interference between the spoken and literary language. I am quoting Danecki's definition, who has devoted the whole chapter of his book, "The Contemporary Arabic Language and Its Dialects" (2000), to the analysis of this variety of language[1]. Danecki concludes that it serves not so much the language communication purposes, as registering the texts. In the above mentioned texts we find certain phenomena which can be systematized and are easy to classify and describe. Middle Arabic texts have appeared since the earliest Islamic times and they embrace the whole Arabic world and

[1] Janusz Danecki, *Współczesny język arabski i jego dialekty* [The Contemporary Arabic Language and Its Dialects], Warszawa 2000, pp. 47–60.

different groups of people. One form of this variety of the language is, among others, Christian Arabic, and it is this form that I had the chance to get acquainted with, while translating texts of the Florentine Council of 1439–1445 under the auspices of Pope Eugene IV, for the Jesuit WAM Publishing House in Cracow. It was an extremely important moment in the history of the Church, as the so-called Florentine Union – the union between Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Roman Catholic Church – took place, which in *Laetentur coeli* – the bull on unity – adopted the common crédo, recognized the pope as the head of the Church and accepted liturgical and canonical distinctions in Eastern Orthodox Churches. The Arabic version of the Council texts from the 11th session of the Florentine Council dated 4 February 1442 on the unification of the Copts and the Roman Catholic Church (the so-called *Bulla unionis Coptorum*), was published by E. Cecconi, *Studi storici sul concilio di Firenze*, Florence 1869, last fasc., 5–64, and next elaborated by J. Gill in a volume entitled *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959, pp. 290–296, 308 and 326. The Polish translation, accompanied by an original text, was published in 2003 by WAM in the third volume of the Councils Documents[2]. This last edition is used as a basis for examples cited below.

It is my current objective to present the phenomena of the Middle Arabic character that appear in the above mentioned text, on one hand supporting their characteristics depicted earlier by Danecki[3], on the other one – extending and complementing it substantially.

First of all, it can be stated that the most characteristic feature of the Middle Arabic syntax is non-observance of agreement. The phenomena noticed by Danecki get confirmed:

1) The usage of masculine plural instead of dual[4]; both in relation to pronouns and verbs, e.g.: *al-kanīsa tuḥrim tāwudārus mūzastānuṣ wa-ka-miṯl nastāriyūṣ allaḏīn ṯabbatū* (p. 590, vv. 19–21) – "the Church excommunicates Theodore of Mopsuestia, as well as Nestorius, who ascertained". It turns out, however, that a pronoun in personal plural also applies to impersonal dual: *qālū anna-hum bidāyatayn awwaliyyatayn* (p. 586, vv. 8–9) – "they claimed that there are two beginnings", and similarly – a verb in personal plural to impersonal dual: *qālū anna fī ăl-masīḥ kānū uqnūmayn* (p. 590, vv. 23–24) – "they claimed that there are two Persons in Christ"; *kānū fī ăl-masīḥ ṭabīʿatayn wa-baʿda ĭttiḥādi-hi ṣārū wāḥidatan* (p. 592, vv. 27–29) – "there were two natures in Christ, and on the union they became one".
2) The confusion of two gender forms[5] – the usage of masculine forms of pronouns and verbs in cases of feminine nouns, e.g.: *kanīsa rūmiyya al-muqaddasa ăllaḏī muta'assisa bi-ṣawt rabbi-nā* – (p. 578, vv. 1–2) – "the Holy Roman Catholic Church, which is

---

[2] *Dokumenty Soborów Powszechnych*, vol. III (1414–1445), ed. Arkadiusz Baron, Henryk Pietras, Publishing House WAM, Kraków 2003, pp. 571–619.

[3] Ibid., p. 53, ff.; on the basis of the works by Simon Hopkins, *Grammar of Early Arabic. Based upon papyri datable to before 300 A.H./A.D.*, Oxford 1984 and V.V. Lebiediev, *Pozdnij sriedniearabskij jazyk (XIII–XVIII vv.)*, Moscow 1977.

[4] Ibid., p. 59.

[5] Ibid.

erected by the voice of our Lord"; *al-munāfaqa ăllaḏī ṣannafa-hā* (p. 606 verse 14) – "the heresy that he created"; *allaḏīn lā yarǧi'ū yaṭlubū az-zawāǧ wa-ya'īšū arāmil* (p. 618, vv. 7–8) – "these, who do not want to get married again, and live as widows".

In the Florentine Council texts, a singular masculine form also appears in relation to impersonal plural, e.g.: *hāḏihi ăl-'aṭāyā li-l-kanīsa ăl-muqaddasa ăllaḏī fī ǧayli-nā a'ṭā-nā* (p. 574, vv. 6–7) – "these gifts for the Holy Church, which he offered us"; *tarātīb al-īmān allaḏī māsaka-hu* (p. 576, vv. 4–5) – "the principles of faith that he observes"; *as-sunan wa-t-tarātīb allaḏī kānū yaṣna'ū-hā* (p. 600, vv. 16–17) – "the rules and rituals that were executed"; *ḏālika ăt-ta'ālīm wa-t-tarātīb* (p. 576, verse 7) – "those teachings and principles"; *ḏālika ăs-sunan baṭṭalū* (p. 600, verse 18) – "those rules were abandoned".

It can also be noted that an ordinal number in the feminine form accompanies a masculine noun: *al-maǧma' al-muqaddas al-ūlà* (p. 608, vv. 12–13) – "the first Holy Council".

Quite often the inconsistency in the way attributive types are applied – either the pronominal or adjectival ones – can be noted in the body of the same clause, e.g.: *tilka ăl-ašyā' ăllatī kānū yaṣna'ū fī ăl-qadīm allaḏī kānat muqassama* (p. 596, vv. 8–9) – "those things which were done in the past and which were divided"; *ḏālika ăn-nār musta'idda li-š-šayṭān* (p. 604, verse 11) – "that fire is prepared for the Satan".

It is possible to add other phenomena to the existing features which testify that the agreement is violated, namely:

- The usage of a singular pronoun in case of personal plural nouns, e.g.: *al-makidūniyyīn allaḏī yaqūlū* (p. 582, vv. 6–7) – "Macedonians who say"; *al-ǧamī' aḫṭaw bi-ḫaṭī'at al-mawt allaḏī ĭrtaǧaw fī nāmūs al-'atīqa* (p. 596, vv. 18–19) – "everybody who sets hope in the Old Testament laws commits a deadly sin"; *ǧamī' mā aḥramū ḏālika ăl-ābā'* (p. 608, vv. 4–5) – "everything that those fathers condemned".
- The usage of personal plural forms of pronouns and verbs to accompany impersonal nouns, e.g.: *mawāhibu-hu wa-maḥabbatu-hu ăllaḏīn kānū wa-hum akbar wa-akṯar fī hāḏā zamānan* (p. 570, vv. 20–22) – "his gifts and love, which are greater and more numerous in the present times"; *al-kutub al-muqaddasa wa-kutubu-hā al-kanīsiyya... wa-asmā'u-hum hāḏihi* (p. 584, vv. 5–7) – "the Holy Scriptures and the Church scriptures...whose titles are the following"; *ǧamī' al-ašyā'... tuwaṣṣī ăl-kanīsa wa-turīd an yakūnū ṯābitatan* (p. 608, vv. 8–9) – "all the matters... the Church approves of and wants to be sanctioned".
- The application of an attributive in plural to acompany a singular noun; however: *ṯalāṯat mi'a wa-ṯamāniyata 'ašara aban qaddīsīn* (p. 606, verse 7) – "three hundred and eighteen holy fathers";
- The application of attributives in an indefinite form to accompany definite nouns, or definite attributives to accompany nouns in an indefinite form, e.g.: *al-kanīsa ăl-muqaddasa rūmiyya* (p. 572, verse 5); *kanīsa ăr-rūmiyya ăl-muqaddasa* (p. 576, vv. 5–6); *kanīsa rūmiyya ăl-muqaddasa* (p. 578, verse 1) – "the Holy Roman Catholic Church".
- Inconsistency in the application of cases, e.g. *inna fī ăl-masīḥ ṭabī'atayn wa-uqnūm wāḥid* (p. 612, vv. 21–22) – "in Christ there are two natures and one Person" (at the

same time the accusative and the nominative of the subject); *huwa ilāh ḥaqq wa-insānan ḥaqq* (p. 608, vv. 21–22) – "he is the real God and the real Man" (at the same time the nominative and the accusative of the predicative); *li-anna-hu šay'an abadī* (p. 580, vv. 7–8) – "because it is the eternal matter" (the accusative of the subject and the nominative of the attributive); *hāḏā kāna šay'an marḏūl* (p. 602, vv. 6–7) – "it was worth contempt" (the accusative of the predicative and the nominative of the attributive); *al-ḫubz allaḏī li-ağli hāḏā ăt-taqdīs yakūn ḫubzan qamḥī* (p. 616, vv. 18–19) – "the bread for this consecration should be made of wheat" (the accusative of the predicative and the nominative of the attributive).

- Inconsistency of the case of a noun in relation to the numeral, e.g. *mi'atayn aban* (p. 608, verse 14) – "two hundred fathers".
- Inconsistency of genders accompanying the numeral, e.g. *ṯalāṯat mi'a* (p. 606, verse 7) – "three hundred".

The characteristic feature of the syntax in the Florentine Council texts is the usage of the predicative in nominal clauses in the oblique case (accusative) instead of nominative. For example: *fa-naḥnu li-ağli ḏālika mutawaṣṣiyīn bi-ṣawt ar-rabb* (p. 576, vv. 12–13) – "that is why we follow the voice of the Lord"; *li-anna-hu šay'an abadī* (p. 580, vv. 7–8) – "because it is an eternal matter"; *anna-hum bārrīn min ğasad al-masīḥ* (p. 580, verse 28) – "that they are moved away from the body of Christ"; *wa-qālū anna ăl-ibn wa-r-rūḥ al-qudus maḫlūqayn* (p. 582, vv. 8–9) – "they were saying that the Son and the Holy Spirit are created"; *qālū anna-hum bidāyatayn awwaliyyatayn* (p. 586, vv. 8–9) – "they claimed that there are two beginnings"; *naḥnu qā'ilīn* (p. 596, vv. 16–17; p. 618, verse 6) – "we say"; *yasū' al-masīḥ huwa ilāh ḥaqq wa-insānan ḥaqq* (p. 612, vv. 1–2) – "Jesus Christ is the real God and the real Man".

In some cases it can be caused by the elision of the verb *kāna* acting as a copula, for example: *wa-l-maḏkūr andrāwus rağulan muḥtaraman* (p. 574, verse 29) – "the earlier mentioned Andrew (was) a respected man"; *wa-ğamī' allaḏīn muḥarrimīn fī ḏālika ăl-mağma'* (p. 612, verse 9) – "everybody, who (was) condemned during this Council".

In turn, a predicative following the copulas *kāna*, *ṣāra* and *laysa* appears in nominative instead of accusative, as a rule. For example: *wa-lā tuṯabbit al-kanīsa an yakūn ṭab' šarr* (p. 582, vv. 22–23) – "the Church does not claim that nature is evil"; *kull allaḏī fī ăl-masīḥ min al-lāhūt mā yakūn mafrūq min an-nāsūt* (p. 586, vv. 24–26) – "everything that is divinity in Christ, cannot be separated from humanity"; *ittiḥād al-uqnūm yaqdir an yakūn wāḥid* (p. 592, vv. 18–19) – "the union of the Person may be oneness"; *al-lāhūt ṣāra nāsūt* (p. 594, vv. 2–3) – "the divinity has become humanity"; *lā aḥad mawlūd min rağul wa-ĭmra'a yakūn ma'tūq min ḥukm aš-šayṭān* (p. 594, vv. 17–19) – "nobody born of man and woman is free of Satan's power"; *ba'da mağī' al-masīḥ allaḏī kāna dalīl 'alà ğamī' hāḏā* (p. 596, vv. 14–15) – "on the advent of Christ who was the leader in it all"; *mahmā kāna muta'alliq li-s-sunan* (p. 600, verse 16) – "whatever was connected with the rules"; *ayy ğins min aṭ-ṭa'ām laysa marḏūl* (p. 602, vv. 20–21) – "no kind of nourishment can be despised"; *iḏā kāna ṭa'ām mašwī* (p. 602, vv. 21–22) – "if the meal is roasted"; *yasū' al-masīḥ kāna ilāh ḥaqq wa-insānan ḥaqq* (p. 612, vv. 1–2) – "Jesus Christ was the real God and the real

Man"; *allāḏī kāna muta'alliq bi-n-nāsūt* (p. 612, vv. 6–7; also p. 614, verse 15) – "which is connected with humanity"; *kāna maḫbūz* (p. 616, verse 20 and 21; also 22–23) – "was roasted"; *al-ḫubz... yaṣīr ǧasad ḥaqīqī ăl-masīḥ* (p. 616, vv. 26–27) – "bread... becomes the real Body of Christ"; *abadan yakūn ṭā'i'* (p. 618, verse 33) – "will be always obedient".

In one single case the subject of a nominal clause appears in an oblique case (accusative), instead of in nominative: *kāna fī-hi ṭabī'atayn kāmilatayn ṭāhiratayn* (p. 612, vv. 3–4; also p. 614, vv. 11–12) – "there existed in Him two perfect pure natures".

I also noted a single case when a nominative of the adverb of specification took the position of an accusative: *ibn allāh min ǧihat an-nāsūt wulida ḥaqīqī* (p. 588, vv. 9–10) – "the Son of God was born as a real man".

In the sentence structure we can also notice the elision of the conjunction *an* positioned between the modal verb and the subjunctive acting as an infinitive: *mā kānū yaqdirū yafhamū* (p. 590, verse 26 – p. 592, verse 1) – "they could not understand"; *mā qadara yafham* (p. 592, vv. 17–18) – "he could not understand" (another possibility: *ittiḥād al-uqnūm yaqdir an yakūn wāḥid* (p. 592, vv. 18-19) – "the union of the Person may be oneness"); *yumkin ayy 'almānī ya'mid* (p. 598, verse 29) – "every lay person may baptize": *imra'a taqdir taf'al ḏāka* (p. 600, verse 2) – "a woman may do it"; *yaǧib... yatabaqqaw* (p. 602, vv. 26–27) – "one should...resign"; *nurīd nušarriḥ ḏālika ăl-kalām* (p. 616, vv. 8–9) – "we want to explain these words".

A single elision of the conjunction positioned between the main clause and the subordinate object clause also takes place; it is, however, associated with an inserted word, *ya'nī*, so characteristic of spoken language: *ya'nī qālū al-īmān bi-l-masīḥ* (p. 596, vv. 21–22) – "it means that the faith in Christ is talked about".

It is also possible to apply a nominative after the conjunction *anna* – or even (which, in my opinion, is less probable) a nominal form after *an: yatabayyanu la-nā anna (an?) aḫū-nā* (p. 574, vv. 12–13) – "it turned out that our brother".

This last assumption should, however, be taken into consideration when the conjunction *an* carries the meaning of purpose, for example: *katabnā an (anna?) huwa yursil* (p. 574, verse 20) – "we wrote to him to send us".

Classical construction principles are also sometimes ignored in *iḍāfa*. There are also cases when an attributive in the form of a prepositional phrase or an adjective is inserted between the nomen regens and nomen rectum: *bi-wisāṭat bayna ăllāh wa-l-bašar rabbi-nā yasū' al-masīḥ* (p. 594, vv. 20–21) – "the mediation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, between God and humankind"; *ǧasad ḥaqīqī ăl-masīḥ* (p. 616, verse 27) – "the real Body of Christ".

The rules of the word order referring to the position of a demonstrative pronoun in relation to an *iḍāfa* are not respected. For example: *fa-ǧamī' allaḏīn ya'taqidū bi-ḍiddi-hi wa-ĭḫtilāf li-hāḏihi imānat aṯ-ṯālūṯ al-muqaddas* (p. 580, vv. 24–26) – (instead of: *li-imānat aṯ-ṯālūṯ al-muqaddas hāḏihi*) – "everybody, who believes in something contrary to and different from this faith in the Holy Trinity".

In a single case nomen rectum appears in a nominative instead of in genitive: *rayis 'alà dayr abūnā ăl-qadīs anṭūnyūs* (p. 574, vv. 25–26) – "the superior of the monastery of our father, Saint Anthony".

It is also hard to judge if the usage of the negative particle *lam* instead of *lā* – and the following indicative – can be taken as characteristic, e.g.: *wa-lam yazīd al-wāḥid 'an al-aḫar fī ăl-abadiyya* (p. 580, vv. 4–5) – "none is more eternal than the other one" (but: *wa-lā yazīd al-wāḥid 'an al-aḫar fī ăl-'aẓama wa-lā yazīd al-wāḥid 'an al-aḫar fī ăl-quwwa*, p. 580, vv. 5–7) – "none is greater nor stronger than the other one"; as well as creating negative verb forms by *ġayr* instead of *ġayra an: bi-lā ġayr yuqaddisū ăl-ḫubz* (p. 616, vv. 12–13) – "without bread consecration".

As far as morphological features of the Middle Arabic language are concerned – especially those referring to the verb structure – Danecki considers the elision of the final vowel, as well as the *-na* ending in the feminine singular indicative, a particularly characteristic feature[6]. The texts of the Florentine Council prove that the reduction of *-na* also applies to masculine plural indicative, e.g.: *fa-ğamī' allaḏīn ya'taqidū bi-ḍiddi-hi* (p. 580, vv. 24–25) – "everybody, who believes in something contrary"; *al-kanīsa tuḥrim... al-makidūniyyīn allaḏī yaqūlū* (p. 582, vv. 5–7) – "the Church excommunicates... the Macedonians, who say"; *ḏālika ăl-'illa yaṣīrū an* (p. 592, verse 4) – "this faction claims that"; *ğamī' allaḏīn yaftaḫirū bi-ĭsm al-masīḥ* (p. 598, verse 9) – "everybody who praises the name of Christ"; *bi-ḏālik yaṣīrū muḫliṣīn* (p. 598, vv. 20–21) – "in this way they become saved"; *yaqtabilū ğamī' mukāfa'āt al-abadiyya lammā yuṣawwimū wa-yataṣaddaqū* (p. 604, vv. 18–20) – "they receive all the reward of the eternity when they fast and give alms"; *yatūbū 'an ḫaṭiyati-him wa-yakūnū muḫliṣīn* (p. 612, vv. 27–28) – "they will regret their sins and will be saved"; *ya'īšū arāmil* (p. 618, verse 8) – "they live as widows".

Analogical verb forms also appear in compound tenses, for example in the past continuous tense: *kānū yaqūlū* (p. 586, verse 11) – "they were saying"; *mā kānū ya'tarifū* (p. 590, vv. 24–25) – "they did not believe"; *mā kānū yaqdirū yafhamū* (p. 590, verse 26 – p. 592, verse 1) – "they could not understand"; *tilka ăl-ašyā' allatī kānū yaṣna'ū fī ăl-qadīm* (p. 596, vv. 8–9) – "those things that were done in the past"; *as-sunan wa-t-tarātīb allaḏī kānū yaṣna'ū-hā* (p. 600, vv. 16–17) – "the rules and rituals that were established"; *lammā kānū yaraw... kānū yaštahū* (p. 602, vv. 8–9) – "when they saw... they wanted", as well as in other constructions, for example: *allaḏīn lā yarği'ū yaṭlubū ăz-zawāğ* (p. 618, verse 7) – "those who do not want to get married to somebody again".

The texts under analysis provide a definite proof of the reduction of *hamza* in the medial position or its change into *yā'*[7], which is confirmed by the spelling of such words as:

- *ṭawāyif* instead of *ṭawā'if* (p. 570, verse 28) – here: "factions, communities";
- *badū* instead of *bada'ū* (p. 572, verse 7) – "[they] started";
- *ṣanāyi'* instead of *ṣanā'i'* (p. 574, verse 10) – "works";
- *rayis* instead of *ra'īs* (p. 574, verse 25) – "head, leader";
- *ḫalāyiq* instead of *ḫalā'iq* (p. 582, verse 19) – "creations";
- *'awāyid* instead of *'awā'id* (p. 602, vv. 6 and 12) – "customs";
- *ṭāyi'* instead of *ṭā'i'* (p. 618 verse 33) – "obedient".

---

[6] Ibid., p. 56.

[7] Ibid., p. 54.

Some other spelling curiosities include:

- the lack of markings of assimilation between words: *'an mā kānū fī-hi* (p. 598, vv. 7–8) – instead of *'ammā*;
- the joint spelling of a noun and preposition: *yaḫṭurū 'ālamawt* (p. 598, verse 16) – instead of *'alà ăl-mawt*;
- the spelling of the word *al-lāhūt* – "divinity" with *lām* contracted under an unmarked *šadda* (e.g. p. 586, verse 28); in some cases correctly (e.g. p. 588, verse 5).

In the lexical sphere we can note an untypical use of prepositions[8], e.g. *laday* instead of *li-*: *al-ism al-mumağğid laday rabbi-nā yasū' al-masīḥ* (p. 572, vv. 1–2) – "the glorified name of Jesus Christ"; or *li-* instead of *bi-*: *mahmā kāna muta'alliq li-s-sunan* (p. 600, verse 16) – "whatever was connected with rules".

The word *bārr* acts as an adjective instead of *barrānī* ("turned away, distanced"): *anna-hum bārrīn min ğasad al-masīḥ* (p. 580, verse 28) – "they are turned away from the Body of Christ".

The analysis of the language characteristics present in the 15th century text, makes up a contribution to the research on the phenomenon of Middle Arabic, which is carried out in a rather limited range. The research work particularly worth attention includes the names of Joshua Blau (e.g. *Studies in Middle Arabic and its Judaeo-Arabic Variety*, Jerusalem 1988), Simon Hopkins (*Grammar of Early Arabic. Based upon papyri datable to before 300 A.H./912 A.D.*, Oxford 1984) and V.V. Lebiediev (*Pozdnij sriedniearabskij jazyk XIII–XVIII vv.*, Moscow 1977).

These works, similarly to the critical analysis I am presenting here, are of historical character. Still, they present an indispensable and extremely important basis to understand the phenomenon of the contemporary variety of Middle Arabic, called *al-luġa ăl-mutawassiṭa*, or *al-luġa ăl-wusṭà*, which has not been elaborated before. The characteristics of the spoken language in the contemporary texts are dealt with by two authors at present: Barbara Johnstone (*Orality and discourse structure in Modern Standard Arabic*, 1990, in: *Perspectives on Arabic Linguistics* I, pp. 215–233) and Madiha Doss (*Some remarks on the oral factor in Arabic linguistics*, 1995, in: *Dialectologia Arabica*, Helsinki, pp. 49–61). Their findings indicate the importance of the phenomenon discussed and they mark up an extremely interesting research territory.

[8] See ibid., p. 58.