

Standardizing functional testing of mutual intelligibility in Arabic dialectology: Methods and tools

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In Arabic dialectology, the concept of mutual intelligibility is often invoked whether in positive (Ryding 2005:6) or negative terms (Abu-Haidar 2000:93) to illustrate one claim or another about the nature of the complex phenomenon that is Arabic. Until recently, however, there had not been any rigorous research undertaken to investigate the degree to which varieties of Arabic (either on the level of major regional groupings or within one such group) are mutually intelligible, even though a number of methodologies exist (Gooskens 2013) which have been successfully used to test mutual intelligibility in similarly complex linguistic landscapes such as topolects of Chinese (Tang & Van Heuven 2009).

Last year, a pilot project was launched which seeks to address the lack of meaningful data on mutual intelligibility of Arabic varieties by functionally testing the mutual intelligibility of three dialects of Maghribi Arabic. This paper discusses the methodology used in the project from the selection of test materials and components to testing procedure. Special focus will be given to the issues resulting from the idiosyncratic nature of linguistic variation within Arabic with the aim of establishing a mutual intelligibility testing framework designed to be used across the entire spectrum of varieties of Arabic and to deliver comparable and meaningful data. Additionally, the paper will introduce a software solution developed for the purpose of efficiently administering mutual intelligibility tests in field conditions and the software's design and use will be briefly discussed in order to elicit feedback.