From Quran to Contemporary Arabic: Processes of Secularization: The Case of Arabic Hara:m حرام

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Abstract: Words change with time. A semantic/grammatical/syntactic shift of words/phrases (often referred to as processes of ‘Grammaticalization’, or ‘Pragmaticalization’) is a common and well-known phenomenon in linguistic research. Words constantly undergo changes cross linguistically, either ‘externally’ (due to the pragmatic recruiting and mobilization of certain pragmatic functions for discursive purposes) or internally (due to the intrinsic nature of the form-function-state of affairs correlation). Palestinian Arabic (henceforth PA), which is often characterized as a language of “diglossia” (two or more separate languages or dialects of the same language used by the same language community under different conditions), has arguably noticeable examples of linguistic shifts from the Qur’an and literature Arabic to Contemporary (‘Spoken’) Arabic. In other words, we will not be investigating PA from its diglossia point of view, but rather treat it as a united language that has undergone massive linguistic shifts. Specifically, this paper will demonstrate such a shift by presenting the word ħara:m حرام, originally meaning ‘completely and extremely forbidden’ in the ancient text of the Qur’an, but often used in contemporary Arabic to express one’s ‘negative stance’ (usually expressing sorrow or mercy). We claim that these words’ contemporary use cannot be detached from their religio-linguistic history, and we will present their path of linguistic change down the course of history, from the Qur’an to Contemporary Arabic. In addition, we claim that although these words have undergone linguistic changes, their core pragmatic function, which was originally recruited and mobilized for discursive purposes, persists diachronically to the point where its recruited function to express one’s strong stance, has become semantic/grammatical. Lastly, this change will be claimed to have undergone ‘secularization’ (see Bardenstein and Fry, 2020), from religious objective legislation to contemporary inter-subjective use, via expressing speakers’ stance. This mechanism of linguistic change will be claimed to involve constructionalization and other relevant linguistic processes. The corpus of Spoken Arabic that we used is a written and semi-written data which was collected from WhatsApp and Facebook posts (including “talk-backs” (commenters to these posts)). For earlier periods, following the Quran to contemporary PA, we used literary texts using Google Books. Since the concept (word) investigated in this paper is linguistically and religiously-culturally complex, we will be trying to shed further light on the Arabic language in general and its development in particular.

Keywords: secularization, pragmatics, discourse analysis, semantic change

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