

English Translation of the  
**INTRODUCTION**

to

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Der arabische Dialekt der Dörfer um Ramallah.

Teil 1: Texte

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For more information see: <http://seeger.uni-hd.de/>

It appears that the Arabic dialect of Central Palestine is well documented. On one side there is the grammar by Leonhard Bauer “Das Palästinische Arabisch – Die Dialekte des Städters und des Fellachen” (Leipzig, 1926), containing also a comprehensive chrestomathy, on the other hand there is the marvellous two volume text collection by Hans Schmidt and Paul Kahle “Volkserzählungen aus Palästina – gesammelt bei den Bauern von Bir Zet” (Göttingen 1918/1930). In the course of my work concerning the dialect of il-Xalil (Hebron) I happened

to encounter speakers from the area of Bīr Zēt whose dialect differed significantly from those previous descriptions. The most apparent feature was the lack of an Imala of the feminine ending (*zalama* instead of *zalame* “man”), the personal suffix of the third person masculine *-a* (*bēta* instead of *bētu* or *bēte* “his house”) and the use of the independent personal pronouns *hūta* and *hīta* (instead of *hū* and *hī*). Referring to an indicative phrase from a recording (see text 11) I decided to call these dialects *hīta bīnta* dialects (“she is his daughter”). As to further linguistic notes I should like to refer to the grammar which I intend to publish too.

My love for Palestine and for Arabic dialectology fostered my decision to busy myself more closely with those *hīta bīnta* dialects, and this specifically to find the villages where these dialects are still alive. Accordingly, I travelled to Bīr Zēt in 1998, visiting in the course of one year with about 160 villages in a stretch around Bīr Zēt extending south up to Jerusalem and north up to Salfit (situated about half way between Ramallah and Nablus). On the way I worked with a little questionnaire conceived for the very purpose, and I tried to make sound recordings. Since the first one proved rather inefficient – for different reasons – I focussed soon upon the recordings though the understanding and transcription turned out later to be a very time consuming and tedious work.

But a lucky star lingered over the project, a favorable fate sent me Taḥsīn ‘Alāwnih who had just finished his English studies at the Birzeit University. His general inclination towards linguistic issues and his love for the Palestinian vernacular aroused his interest in my project, and he offered his help. Hence, a wonderful co-operation evolved, and there is not the slightest doubt that this anthology presented here would not have been accomplished without his contribution and support. In most cases he prepared the visits to the villages, thus establishing prior contacts to the dwellers using his widespread connections through friends and relatives, rarely we went at random, rarely I travelled by myself. Listening later to the recordings he did this with super-human patience until I was able to arrive at a preliminary version of a transcription or at least had fathomed the vocabulary as much as possible.

However, the time then at my disposal was not sufficient to accomplish a translation into German. Since more work was waiting upon my return the text compilation was put aside for the time being. Only after almost seven years, it was professor Werner Arnold who made it possible to take up the texts again and to continue with the analysis, this time sponsored by the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation. I should like to express at this point my gratitude and appreciation, acknowledging the support by Werner Arnold and the Fritz-Thyssen-Foundation. Proceeding with the final editing and implementation on my own I was pleased to recognize the quality of the preparatory input together with Taḥsīn ‘Alāwnih. In

addition to those items in need of clarification from the very beginning rather few new issues came up. Already during the recordings we immediately tried to insist and to question if unusual formulations and incomprehensive expressions were used. However, being well of age some of the individuals seemed no longer capable to meet our demands. As a consequence, the results were in some cases not satisfying. Those problems occurring only at home could not be resolved by discussing them with the original speaker since another journey to the same village was beyond our financial means. The circumstances are also that the region is occupied, that foreigners are subject to restrictions by the military and are threatened and harassed by violent settlers. Incomprehensive and unclear expressions in the text are indicated by footnotes or by introducing a blank [...] if there is an omission.

By and large, to find suitable speakers proved to be in general difficult. The Palestinian people have lost their roots during the enduring process of colonization causing migration and mixing of the population. For example, the present urban dialect spoken in the former rural village of Ramallah is due to the influx of refugees from Ramle and Lidd, in 1948. Also, young people prefer in general a Koiné close to urban Arabic, and rarely still speak a genuine dialect. The ubiquitous modern language was not my interest, I devoted myself to the nineteenth century farmer's dialect, being on the brink of becoming extinct. In a sense, this work may be considered language archaeology.

Altogether we succeeded to collect recordings from 120 individuals, including 34 women and 14 Christians, the average age being 66 years. As a rule, adequate speakers were elderly people. The oldest person counted 104 years, was born in the nineteenth century. But old age implies difficulties: The tales passed formerly from generation to generation have now arrived at a point of becoming obsolete, neglected and forgotten. The aged people remember often their stories but by bits and pieces, confusing details, so that the result is of interest linguistically but sometimes simply hard to bear for the reader. Therefore, I confined myself here to present a selection of 118 tales from 66 individuals (a third of them being women) distributed over 50 villages. Purposely, I put some of the finest stories to the beginning of the collection but in proceeding the reader is certainly allowed to encounter some more jewels within the art of story telling. He may forgive those, who due to age, are made responsible for a text of lesser charm. It is to be mentioned and recognized that this anthology must not be compared to the "Volkserzählung aus Palästina" by Schmidt/Kahle. The latter representing a literary work focusing upon a written language whereas the emphasis here is upon oral communication. Dschirius Jusif helping then Hans Schmidt put the tales down in Arabic. At home he transferred the text transcribing it in his own dialect, i.e. the dialect of Bīr Zēt. During this process he smoothed the tales, ironing them out to remove unlogical parts this way achieving a neat piece of literature. This here is different:

The transcription follows rigorously the words as they were pronounced, any slip of the tongue, any subsequent insertion, any interrupted sentence, any erratic string of words is being presented exactly as they occur in the original recording. The reader may listen to the original recordings at SemArch, the Semitic Language Archives of the University of Heidelberg at [www.semarch.uni-hd.de](http://www.semarch.uni-hd.de).

The more reading and listening, the more there is a feeling developing whether conspicuous syntactical wording or phrasing might be genuine or due to a momentary confusion of the speaker. My advice is to restrain from premature conclusions in order to avoid that random mistakes may taken to be linguistic novelties. For example, if a speaker pronounces *il-dič*, this does not mean that in his dialect *d* is a moon letter but rather that he had thought of the word *dič* only when he had uttered already the article *il-*, and therefore was too late to perform the assimilation. The original recording always helps to reveal irregularities. In transcribing I did not correct wrong pronunciations or false grammar that may happen at times to any speaker, sometimes I indicated it by a footnote. Considering a project like this one a change of strategies of how to deal with specific phenomena is likely to occur in the course of time. Consequently, I apologize for some of the inconsistencies thus resulting in the transcription.

The German translation is to serve primarily the comprehension of the Arabic text. To this end I focussed upon the exact reproduction of the original at the expense of a decent quality of the German translation. I even tried to render clumsy expressions into German. The translation has but the purpose to provide an aid to those reading the original text. To achieve this goal implied to forego elegant German formulations. At the point where the reader is left at loss with his understanding I suggest to consult the glossary which I endeavoured to prepare with great care. I took liberties, however, in two cases. First, I translated the inflationary *kalla, kallha etc* (literally: “he told him/her”), which is used as our colon and commonly placed at the beginning of a direct speech, with “he asked him” or “he answered him” and similar phrases in order to avoid monotony. Second, the imperfect tense often used in the talking I substituted by the perfect tense in German. The orthography of the German text is based upon the rules and regulations valid until 2005, since I started the translation in 1998. Ms Pia Oberacker did the proof reading and I should like to thank her sincerely. She is not accounting for mistakes due to small changes and supplements that I could not help inserting though anyway, eventually. Finally, I should like to thank my friend Ralf G. Cembrowicz providing the present translation of this introduction from the original German.

Ulrich Seeger, February 2008