Linguistic Variation in the Nabataean Aramaic of the Nabataean Period

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Abstract

One of the unusual features of the corpus of "Nabataean" texts is the fact that they are geographically spread over a very wide area (southern Syria, Jordan, Sinai and northern Saudi Arabia). The aim of the paper is to review the evidence of variation in the Nabataean Aramaic dialect in different regions of Nabataean presence. This variation is not easy to define in detail, but some broad features are clear and have been recognized since the early days of the study of Nabataean epigraphy (e.g. recognition of "Arabisms" by Th. Nöldeke). The variations are detectable on different linguistic levels: in phonetics (at least as detected in spelling), morphology, syntax and lexica. There is also some evidence of variation according to genres of text. All these aspects are reviewed and possible models of explanation are explored, taking account of the fundamental issue of the significance of regional differences in Nabataean culture.

Keywords: Nabataean language, language variation, regionalism.

Introduction

My former Manchester colleague Jim Adams has written extensively about Latin linguistics, with three substantial books which also explore theoretical aspects applicable to other languages. His books are devoted to "Regional Variation in Latin" (2007), "Latin in Bilingual Environments" (2008) and "Social Variation in Latin" (2013). Of course we do not have for Nabataean Aramaic the enormous textual sources provided by Latin in the Roman Empire, but Nabataean Aramaic was used over a wide area and a long period of time. Like Latin in the Roman Empire it was subject to the linguistic forces which could have led to variation, especially since we know that Nabataean Aramaic operated in a multilingual context alongside Safaitic (and other North Arabian languages such as Dadanitic/Liḥyanite) and Greek. It was thus subject to the forces which affect all "Language Contact", a topic to which much research has been devoted in recent years. For a full account see *Linguistic Contact* by Yaron Matras (another

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Manchester colleague) (2009) and, in the Semitic context, *Semitic Languages in Contact*, edited by Aaron Butts (2015)[2]. In the context of another Aramaic dialect, Syriac, Butts has also written *Language Change in the Wake of Empire* (2016), while I myself published an article some years ago on "Variety in Early Syriac" (2008): the early Syriac inscriptions of approximately 70 to 250 CE fall into two sub-varieties, two slightly different dialects, though written in the same script, separated probably by time and perhaps by sociolinguistic environment. All of these publications provide us with models in the light of which to consider variation in Nabataean Aramaic.

Before going further, I should make clear that what I am concerned with here is variation in what might be called "*Classical*" Nabataean Aramaic, by which I mean the Nabataean Aramaic of the Nabataean kingdom period, i.e. prior to 106 CE (or from the immediately following years, since it obviously did not change overnight!). There is no doubt that there was variation *later* in the Aramaic written in the Nabataean script, just as there was also clear Arabic-type influence, as recently surveyed by Laïla Nehmé (2017). This was part of the transition to the use of Arabic in the later pre-Islamic and then, of course, the Islamic periods. There is no dispute about these *later* stages of Nabataean or Nabataeo-Arabic, as seen, for example, in the Raqūsh inscription of Madā'in Ṣāliḥ (JS Nab 17[3]) and other transitional examples (see the volume edited in 2010 by Macdonald [2010a]). For the present purpose I am setting this later development aside and concentrating on the Nabataean Aramaic of the Nabataean period.

Nabataean Aramaic is a direct descendant of the Imperial Aramaic of the Achaemenid Persian period (see most recently Gzella 2015: 195, 238-246). It has long been noted that it has some clearly conservative features, features which had disappeared from other late forms of Aramaic which are contemporary with Nabataean (Cantineau 1930-32: I, 11-12; Rosenthal 1939: 91-92; Beyer 1986: 26-27; Morgenstern 1999). It cannot, however, be regarded as entirely fossilized, since Matthew Morgenstern (1999: 139*-140*) showed that Judaean Aramaic of the same period as Nabataean Aramaic, and a near neighbour, shared a number of innovative features with Nabataean Aramaic. Both dialects were descendants of Imperial Aramaic, but both also show some shared innovations, such as non-metathesis and non-mutation of prefixed *-t-* in verbal forms based on roots beginning with a sibilant, like *ytzbn* (instead of expected *yzdbn*: see Morgenstern 1999: 139*). Departure from normal morphology might arise from an Arabic-type substrate. For *ytzbn* see H 28: 4.[4] We may note also *ʾtzbn* in one of the Naḥal Ḥever papyri (the Babatha archive), p. Yadin 7: 54, which Greenfield (1991: 223)

[2] Note that Butts 2018, which focusses on "Language Contact" in relation to Nabataean Aramaic, was published after this paper was completed and presented. It includes a concise account of linguistic theory on "Language Contact" (pp. 42-45).

[3] JS Nab = Nabataean inscriptions in Jaussen and Savignac 1909 (I) and 1914 (II). In what follows, the *siglum* H = inscriptions in Healey 1993; *RES* = *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*; *CIS* = *Corpus Insciptionum Semiticarum*.

[4] The non-metathesization is not, however, universal: see *yztbn* in H 5: 5; *yztry* H 38: 6.

interpreted as an Arabism. In the same line note may be made of *ʾštrhn*, according to Greenfield an Aramaicization of the Arabic tenth form: *istafʿala*. In *CIS* II, 350, the Turkmāniyyah inscription, the form *ytšnʾ* appears (instead of expected *yštnʾ*). There are also shared innovative demonstratives *ʾln* and *ʾnw* (Morgenstern 1999: 138*).

All of this suggests a regional linguistic leftover from the Achaemenid period and that local dialects of Aramaic were developing slowly in slightly different ways. In Judaea one can detect the influence of Hebrew in the emergence of Judaean Aramaic. In Nabataea it has, of course, long been understood that some Arabic-type influence was active in the formation even of "Classical" Nabataean Aramaic.

Although Arabic influence clearly plays a part, I do not want to discuss directly here the question of Arabic influence in Nabataean Aramaic: my present focus is on language *variation* in different parts of the Nabataean realm. It should be said in passing, however, that there is still some uncertainty in the evaluation of the Arabic influence on Nabataean Aramaic. Nöldeke (1885) had been quite cautious about it, but Cantineau (see, e.g., 1930-32: I, x) claimed that Arabic *heavily* influenced Nabataean Aramaic. O'Connor subsequently (1986) was able to refute Cantineau's overstated case, while most recently Butts (2018: 39-41) has argued on a statistical basis that the Arabic influence is relatively strong (by comparison with other cases of contact-induced linguistic interference, e.g. Greek loans in Classical Syriac). In any case the Arabic-type influence in Nabataean Aramaic was not as pervasive as Cantineau supposed, certainly not in the pre-106 CE period — and this needs noting because Cantineau still holds sway as the main descriptive grammar of Nabataean Aramaic. (See more recently al-Shabbār 2004; al-Hamad 2005; al-Khamaiseh 2007; al-Theeb 2011; also ʿAbābneh 2002.)

The influence of Arabic is often seen as the result of a bilingual situation in which the Nabataeans spoke some form of Arabic or Safaitic in their daily lives (as the vernacular), while using Aramaic for formal inscriptions and legal texts, choosing to do so because Aramaic was already well established as a written medium and deeply entrenched in the religious and legal traditions. However, the situation may have varied in different parts of the Nabataean territory.

The amount of Arabic influence, let alone Arabic itself, in evidence in the period of the Nabataean kingdom is small, but not insignificantly small. There *are* Arabic *loanwords* (not as many as Cantineau thought, though the Nabataean papyri published since Cantineau's time add to the list of examples: Yardeni 2014)) and a single line in a 1st or 2nd century CE inscription which has been widely interpreted as being in some form of Arabic (Negev 1986 and most recently Kropp 2017). This inscription appears to involve a dramatic example of "code-switching", i.e. using different languages for different purposes (Adams 2008: 18-29; Coulmas 2013: 121-140), in which a form of Arabic is used alongside Nabataean Aramaic, with Arabic used in a proverbial or religious, perhaps liturgical, phrase (Gzella 2015: 246; Macdonald 2010b: 20). And then

there are the Safaitic inscriptions, some of which certainly date to or even belong in terms of political allegiance to the Nabataean kingdom (al-Jallad 2015: 17-18).

This evidence suggests that many, if not all, of the writers of Nabataean Aramaic spoke some form of Arabic as a vernacular. Michael Macdonald, having earlier thrown doubt on the evidence that the Nabataeans spoke Arabic in everyday life, later revised his view because of the appearance of Arabisms in the Jewish Babatha papyri (2000: 46-48; 2010b: 19-21). I agree in general with this conclusion, but it remains surprising, if the Nabataeans did not speak Aramaic but Arabic in daily life, that there is not more evidence of Arabic-type intrusions into the way they wrote Aramaic — one might expect tell-tale misspellings, frequent syntactical errors, etc., not just a handful of loanwords, largely limited, as we will see, to specific semantic fields. Bilingual situations where both languages are in concurrent use usually result in clearer evidence of interference from one language to the other, combined sometimes with "code-switching" (on code-switching and diglossia see Milroy and Muysken 1995; Ferguson 1959; Coulmas 2013: 141-162; Taylor 2002).

Palmyrene Aramaic could be taken as a parade-ground example for code-switching and bilingualism (Davis and Stuckenbruck 1992; Taylor 2002). In the city of Palmyra, Greek had official status and was widely used in bilingual inscriptions (alongside Aramaic) and in monolingual inscriptions. As a result, there are clear examples of Greek modes of expression being transferred into Palmyrene Aramaic, resulting in un-Aramaic idioms and syntax, e.g. in the Palmyrene Tariff text (Healey *forthcoming*). We may note that there is evidence in Palmyra also of the influence of some form of Arabic (Maraqten 1995). With regard to code-switching in this diglossic situation, Palmyrene Aramaic is generally preferred in religious and burial, i.e. non-official, contexts.

A possible factor explaining the restricted evidence of Arabic influence in Nabataean, however, is the conservatism of Nabataean scribal training in traditional legal and religious formulae. Scribes intervened between the language of every day and the language in public use and used typical formulae from Aramaic tradition along with the Aramaic language. Despite this conservatism, legally significant items of legal vocabulary of Arabic or similar origin were imported into Nabataean Aramaic, just as a native speaker of Arabic might, when writing English, use specifically Arabic technical terms such as *kharāj* or *mahr* rather than struggle to translate them (see discussion in Butts 2018: 53-55; see also Macdonald 2010b: 19-21).

What then of variation within Nabataean Aramaic in its classical form in the period of the Nabataean Kingdom?

1. There is clear evidence of *variation through time*. The best example here is that of the phonetic change /z/ > /d/ in the relative particle *dy* and the demonstrative pronoun *dnh*. These are written with {d} in most Nabataean texts, but as *zy* and *znh* in a few early Nabataean Aramaic texts (the Elusa inscription and one published originally by Gustav Dalman [Healey 2009:

nos 1 and 2] and *CIS* II, 349 [Cantineau 1930-32: II, 1-2]).

Note also *hqym* for *ʾqym* in some early inscriptions in forming what became the *apʿel* causative verb form (Morgenstern 1999: 138*-139*: so in *CIS* II, 349), though the situation here is a little more ambiguous, since there are some quite late examples of *hqym* (see Healey 2009: 40).

2. There seems also to be some issue of *variation according to the genre* of the text being written (e.g. legal texts appearing to use a special form of the language, a kind of "legalese", as it is called in English, the special language only understood by lawyers). This variation cuts across geographical regions (being known from the Babatha archive and from the Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ tomb inscriptions) and is marked by the use of set formulae, such as "whoever shall do other than what is written above shall be liable..." (H 1: 6-7) and "a deed of entitlement from the hand of the aforementioned Haniʾu" (H 5: 3).

3. There are also, however, *geographical variations*. I will return to these below, but note here the wide geographical areas involved and the fact that there are three potentially distinguishable linguistic regions: Petra and its hinterland (including the legal papyri from the Zoar area), the Ḥawrān of Syria in the north and the region of Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ in Saudi Arabia in the south. (Sinai might be thought to be a fourth region, but it is here discounted because few inscriptions from there are datable and those which *are* dated come from after the end of the Nabataean kingdom.)

The geographical regionalism is most easily represented by lexical variations, but it is reinforced by reference to a smaller number of real grammatical variations. (There is some debate on the relative weight to be accorded to lexica in this context, though in all bilingual situations lexica are the most clear written evidence of language contact [Matras 2009: 166-194]).

The Ḥawrān inscriptions (see Nehmé 2010 for a full list) contain a number of lexical items which, while not in all cases exclusive to the region, form a noteworthy cluster:

ʾmnʾ	"workman, artisan, sculptor" (Cantineau 1930-32: II, 64, suggesting that *pslʾ* is the southern equivalent)
ʾrbʿnʾ	"rectangular building" (*RES* §§2036, 2037; see Nehmé 2003)
ʾrktʾ	"portico (?)" (*RES* §471)
ʾrnʾ	"sarcophagus" (*CIS* II, 173, but the date is not clear)
byrtʾ	"temple" (*CIS* II, 164; "fortress" elsewhere in Aramaic: Cantineau 1930-32: II, 70)
bnynʾ	"building" (common in Aramaic and perhaps it is an accident that it only appears in the Ḥawrān: *RES* §2054)
ḥmnʾ	"temple, part of a temple (?)" (Nehmé 2010: no. 3, pp. 463-468 at

Mṣayfra, and *RES* §2053, though the latter, from Dayr al-Mashqūq, is a little late in date: 124 CE; see Drijvers 1988)

mḥrmtʾ "sacred, dedicated place" (note *RES* §2093 at Bosra; Nehmé 2010: no. 5, pp. 470-71 at Qrayya). (Though this is not exclusive to the Ḥawrān [at Puteoli, *CIS* II, 158, and al-Jawf, Savignac and Starcky 1957], it is commonly used there.)

msgdʾ "altar" (again prominent in but not exclusive to the Ḥawrān). The word occurs twice at Ḥegra, though in one of the cases (JS Nab 39) there is a clear link with the Ḥawrān and in the other (JS Nab 81-82) there *may* be a similar link: Nehmé 2011. Note may also be made of the spelling of *mšgdʾ* in *RES* §1096 (Umm al-Jimāl)

ṣlmʾ/*ṣlmtʾ* "statue" (not exclusive to the area [see at Petra *CIS* II, 354; Starcky and Strugnell 1966: no. 1, pp. 236-244], but we note that it is very common in the Aramaic of Palmyra and Edessa. (The old reading of *ṣnm* in JS Nab 159, which might have been relevant, is eliminated in Nehmé 2014: 110 — *š* rather than *ṣ*).

trʿʾ "doorway" (common in Aramaic and perhaps an accident that it only appears in the Ḥawrān: *CIS* II, 130).

Others are of Greek origin (and again not exclusive to the Ḥawrān), such as:

bwms "altar" (βωμός) (*RES* §2117; *bmsʾ* in Starcky 1975 from Buṣayra)

tyṭrʾ "portico (?)" (θέατρον) (*RES* §2023, also at Petra: see Healey 2009: 78-79; Jones 2001; Joukowsky and Basile 2001: 54-57)

Almost all of these are connected with architecture or refer to cultic paraphernalia. However, the prominence of terms of this sort in the Ḥawrān region may reflect the nature of the epigraphy of that region, where so much of the surviving written material identifies stone objects built into temples and similar structures, rather than any significant linguistic variation. By contrast relatively few of the Nabataean inscriptions from North Arabia belong in the architectural genre.

Also a fair number of the lexica listed are not exclusive to the region, even if they are frequent there. I would not, therefore, wish to identify individual items as typically Ḥawrānian, but, taking the whole cluster of these words together, including Greek loans in the architectural sphere, we are, I feel, justified in concluding that the vocabulary set of the Ḥawrān is distinct, especially from the North Arabian vocabulary set. However, I will return to the question of genre variation below.

In North Arabia we have words and expressions like the following, in specific categories:

connected with tombs

gt wšlw "body and limb" (= all body parts; H 16)
ṣryḥ' "funerary niche" (H 24; also occurs at Petra in the Turkmāniyyah inscription, *CIS* II, 350)
wgr' "tomb" (H 11, 12; at Ṣalkhad in the Ḥawrān meaning "niche"; note initial *w*-, which is un-Aramaic)

kinship terms

ḥlt' "maternal aunt" (H 13)
nšyb' "relative on the paternal side" (H 36; the written form {š} = /s/, as in *mšgd'* above, though the situation could be more complex)
wld' "children (collective)" (H 10, 14, etc.; note initial *w*-)

legal

ḥlyqt' "customary practice, law" (H 1, 8, 19; also Babatha p. Yadin 1: 17)

verbs

'nh "alienate (?)" (H 1)
l'n "curse" (H 1, 2, 8, etc.; note use of precative perfect as in Arabic, below)[5]
'yr "alter" (H 9, 12, etc.)
rhn "give in pledge" (H 8, 28, etc.; *rhn* does in fact occur in earlier Aramaic, see Healey 1993: 121. According to O'Connor 1986: 216-7, roots with middle *h* are rare in Northwest Semitic)
rtb "draw up" (H 5)

'ṣdq (H 3, 4, 5, etc.) and *kpr'* (over 60 times in the Madā'in Ṣāliḥ tomb inscriptions), which can be added to the above and mean "rightful heir" and "tomb" respectively, are especially interesting since they may be of very local origin in Liḥyanite/Dadanitic (Caskel 1954: no. 65: 2 for *'ṣdq* and no. 63: 3, etc. for *kpr*). They do not occur elsewhere in Nabataean, but do occur in the Liḥyanite texts and are almost certainly local borrowings. The importation of the word *'ṣdq* suggests that legal scribes were adapting to local conditions.[6]

Examples of phonological and morphological distinctness are harder to establish as regional variations.[7] Apart from the instances of non-metathesization

[5] Note also the noun *l'nt*, "curse", in H 11 and H 31 (Butts 2018: 46).

[6] *kpr* is used for "village" in Arabic, but not normally for "tomb" (though see Lane 1863-1893: 2621; de Biberstein-Kazimirski 1875: IV, 84). There is a Syriac inscription from north-east Syria dated 73 CE which uses it (see Drijvers and Healey 1999: Bs2: 7). *'pkl'* (H 16), also found in Egypt and Sinai, is a *Kulturwort* or *Wanderwort* of Sumerian origin and found from South Arabia to Palmyra and Hatra (Healey 1993: 160-62).

[7] Macdonald (2000: 46) has referred to possible phonetic variation in the Ḥawrān, the existence of a third non-emphatic sibilant (in addition to /s/ and /š/), but this is obscured by spelling and the arguments in favour of it could apply to all of Nabataean Aramaic, not just that of the Ḥawrān.

mentioned above, note has been made, for example, of the non-assimilation of the initial /n/ of verbs like *npq*, producing *ynpq* rather than the normal Aramaic *ypq*, but there is a difficulty here in that the apparent non-asssimilation may be better explained simply as historical spelling (as in Syriac; see Healey 1993: 84).

We can, however, add to the regional characteristics in lexicon, syntactical features which are limited to North Arabia:

p- "then" (H 1, 2, 3, etc.), introducing apodoses or consequences (see H 1: 7, etc. Levinson 1974: 58-9 denies that *p-* is an Arabism, though he fails to take account of the syntactic aspect, which clearly points to Arabic).

ʿyr "other than, not" (H 1, 3, 5, etc.), a negative particle or preposition.

mn "whoever" (H 5: 8-9; 12: 7-8; 19: 6, etc.), an indefinite relative pronoun, rather than *mn dy*, which is the norm for Aramaic (and common also in Nabataean). Note discussion of Nöldeke 1885: 78-79 and recently Butts 2018: 50-53, where it is noted that there is slight evidence of this feature in *earlier* Aramaic and in non-Arabic north Arabian (Safaitic and Hismaic).

Precative perfect rather than a so-called jussive form: *lʿn* "let him curse" (H 1: 4; 8: 5; 11: 6; v. *ylʿn*: e.g. H 16: 3); *šhd* "let it (the curse of Dushara) bear witness" (H 11: 8). The precative use of the perfect is found also in Safaitic, Dadanitic, etc. (Butts 2018: 49).

All of these items have been commented upon before as evidence of Arabic influence on Nabataean in northern Arabia, but it may also be concluded that they show that Nabataean Aramaic *varied* in different regions. However, there are a number of lexical "Arabisms" also in the legal texts of the Babatha Nabataean documents (Yadin et al. 2002: 27-32; Yardeni 2014) and it is not impossible that genre has much to do with their prominence in a legal context at Madā'in Ṣāliḥ.

The significance of genre has been noted before (Morgenstern 1999: 136*, citing Gropp 1990: 170, n. 5 on variation in Imperial Aramaic). Almost all of the Arabic-type influences in the Madā'in Ṣāliḥ texts, including the syntactic features, are found in the tomb inscriptions. These are summaries of legal documents which probably existed in a fuller form on papyri kept in an archive (Healey 2013: 166-169). So it is possible that this prominence of Arabisms is really a reflection not of proximity to north Arabia (which cannot be the cause in the Babatha Nabataean documents), but of the genre of legal praxis in the background of both sets of texts (see also Macdonald 2010b: 19-21).

The Nabataean legal texts have often been compared to earlier Aramaic legal traditions (Healey 2005), but they are different from the earlier Aramaic legal texts in that they have so many Arabic-like expressions, both items of lexica and syntactic forms. This seems to imply that the earlier Aramaic legal tradition had long had a symbiotic relationship with the speakers of Arabian languages and that this is the source of the Arabic-like intrusions: in other words Arabic speakers may

have been using Aramaic legal formulae in legal texts for hundreds of years before the writing of the Madā'in Ṣāliḥ and Babatha texts, introducing into them their own words for various legal details.

Conclusion and a Final Note

It is clear that there is some regional variation in the Nabataean Aramaic of the Nabataean Kingdom. The Madā'in Ṣāliḥ region is clearly distinct from the region of Petra and the Dead Sea, even if we discount the Arabic-influenced legal jargon which appears in both regions. I.e. other differences, syntactic differences, remain even if some legal terms were shared because of the influence of North Arabian legal terminology. Difference of genre, however, may explain away some of the regional differences, telling us more about Nabataean law than about linguistic diversification. The Ḥawrān is less distinctive, but this needs further exploration.

It is worth noting that some of the Nabataean Aramaic papyri from the Babatha archive were written by Jews who drew up legal documents in *Judaean* Aramaic, itself another descendant of Imperial Aramaic. Those Judaean Aramaic texts *also* contain Arabisms in the legal sphere (Yardeni 2014). Does this suggest that the Aramaic legal *koinē* of the whole region was strongly influenced by Arabic-type language at a much earlier stage than we have hitherto suspected? In other words, these elements which are held in common with Arabic or a related north Arabian language like Dadanitic could be long-standing results of cultural and linguistic contact and the emergence of what might be called "Arabian Aramaic", a specifically North Arabian form of that language. If this were proved correct, this Arabian Aramaic may have been an important stepping-stone towards what Nehmé (2017) calls "Nabataeo-Arabic" and, ultimately, the spread of "Classical" Arabic.

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التباينُ اللُّغويُّ في الآراميّة النبطية للعصر النبطيّ

جون ف. هيلي

ملخص

إنّ إحدى مزايا مُدَوَّنَةِ النصوص النبطيّة غير الاعتياديّة هي حقيقة أنها تغطّي مساحة واسعة منَ الناحية الجغرافيّة (جنوب سوريا، والأردن، وسيناء، وشمال السعودية). وعليه، فإنّ هدف هذه الدراسة مراجعةُ الدليل على التنوّع في اللهجة النبطية الآراميّة في مناطقَ مختلفةٍ منَ الوجود النبطيّ، وهو تنوُّعٌ ليس منَ السهل تحديدُهُ بالتفصيل، لكنّ بعض المزايا العامّة واضحة وجرى إدراكُها منذ بداية دراسة النقوش النبطية (على سبيل المثال إدراك العربيّة فيها من قبل نولدكه). ويمكنُ رصدُ الاختلافات على مستويات لُغويّة مختلفة: في الصوتيات (كما هو ملموس في التهجئة على الأقل)، وفي البناء اللُّغويّ، وفي النَّحو والمعجم، وهناك أيضًا دليلٌ على التنوّع بناءً على أسلوب النصّ الأدبيّ. علمًا أنّ هذه الجوانب جميعَها سَتُراجَعُ وَسَتُكْتَشَفُ نماذجُ تفسير محتملة، معَ الأخذ بالحسبان المسألة الجوهريّة للاختلافات المناطقيّة البارزة في الثقافة النبطيّة.

الكلمات الدالة: اللُّغة النبطيّة، التنوُّع اللُّغويّ، الإقليميّة.

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