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(eds.)**

**AIDA Granada:  
A Pomegranate  
of Arabic Varieties**

**Colección ESTUDIOS DE DIALECTOLOGÍA ÁRABE  
Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza**







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PRENSAS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

## **ESTUDIOS DE DIALECTOLOGÍA ÁRABE, 21**

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# Linguistic Analysis of the Syrian Comic *Kōktēl* “Cocktail”

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## Abstract

Following the Syrian revolution, art in its various expressions, has contributed as an instrument of information and criticism and as a vehicle for transmitting the desire for change. Since 2012 Syrian illustrators have started anonymously publishing their comics on the *Comic4 Syria* Facebook page. The collection focuses on the Syrian revolution and the country's social, economic and political problems.

In this work one of the comics entitled “Cocktail” (*Kōktēl*) belonging to the *Comic4 Syria* collection has been translated and examined from a linguistic and socio-linguistic point of view.

The cartoon under consideration is particularly interesting for the linguistic variety used, as the author also uses the Alawite dialect in addition to the urban Syrian Arabic (of Damascus).

**Keywords:** Syrian comics, *Comic4 Syria*, Alawite variety, Syrian Arabic.

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of the Arab revolutions, comics has spread even more and has also been used by artists to express dissent and criticism. In Syria comics immediately became, in many cases, an essential tool in favor of the Syrian people dragged into the vortex of revolution and civil war.

Since 2012 a new generation of Syrian illustrators and graphic designers has started anonymously posting their comics on the *Comic4 Syria* Facebook page, in which comics highlight the terrifying Syrian situation.

In this paper, we examine the *Comic4 Syria* collection and focus on the linguistic and sociolinguistic analysis of the *Kōktēl* “Cocktail” comic, analyzing colloquial expressions and idioms and paying attention to some features of the Alawite variety used in the text.

This research has two goals: to provide a preliminary and concise overview of recent comic book productions in Syria following the revolution with a particular look at the *Comic4 Syria* collection and to analyze the Syrian Arabic used in the comic *Kōktēl* “Cocktail”, an interesting case because the author uses Alawite variety of the coastal area, whose studies are not yet many.

## 2. Overview of contemporary comics in Syria

The Arab revolutions has strongly influenced the spread of comics which have represented an instrument of information, denunciation and dissent. Before the revolutions, magazines and various types of printed publications were for a long time the only platform for reading comics, whose publication was controlled by the State. Comics have always suffered from limited dissemination due to lack of financial support; aside from the state-run periodicals, the comic book albums for adults were self-produced and independently financed.

There are studies on comics and humor in Arab countries, among which we mention: Ghaibeh (2015), Millet (1987), De Angelis (2015), Douglas / Douglas (1994), Avallone (2011), Branca, De Poli, Zanelli (2011), Di Marco (2011), Gameel (2014), Bank (2012), Damlouji (2016), Dozio (2021). Many of these studies are focused on the analysis of the development of comics in Egypt, while little bibliography exists on the artistic genre of comics in Syria.

In the past the Syrian government, realizing the important role of comics in influencing the younger generations, had already forbidden comic magazines in the 70s and 80s, allowing the diffusion of *ʔUsāma*, created in 1972. Although, for many years, there has been an active scene regarding comics in Syria, so far not many graphic novels have been published. Several attempts to start adult comics magazines failed due to a lack of sponsorship (Bank 2012).

The new young cartoonists express their art mainly through the Internet<sup>1</sup> (blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other social networks), but also through traditional channels, such as magazines or collections.

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<sup>1</sup> Documentations by various artists on the Syrian revolution can be found at the following site: <https://creativememory.org/>.

During the revolution in Syria and later during the civil war, art immediately became an essential tool for denouncing abuses and criticizing the regime.

One of the best-known Syrian cartoonists is Ḥamīd Sulaymān with his graphic novel *Mustašfā l-hurriyya* “Freedom Hospital” (2018) published in France and then translated into English. The heart of the story is a clandestine hospital, a sort of makeshift aid center in a small provincial town controlled by the Al-ʿAsad regime in northern Syria. Established by the protagonist Yasmine, the hospital soon becomes a reflection of the complexities of Syrian society.

Another Syrian artist who wrote graphic novels about Syria is Riyād Saṭṭūf. Currently residing in France, Riyād Saṭṭūf becomes famous for his autobiographical comic book *l'Arabe du future (1978-2011)* (2014) of which there are currently five volumes, all written in French.

A separate case constitutes *Tīn Baʿl maḡalla sūrīyya šahrīyya li-l-yāfiʿīn*<sup>2</sup> “Fig. Syrian magazine for young people”, a comic for children and teenagers (published between 2015 and 2017). In Arabic *Tīn Baʿl* is a fig watered with rainwater, *baʿl* means naturally irrigated plant, not artificial. It’s a word pun between *Teen*, abbreviation of the English *Teenager* and *Tīn* which in Arabic means “figs”. A comparison is made between the fruit and the boys who have yet to become ripe, just like figs.

### 3. Comic4 Syria Facebook page

*Comic4 Syria*<sup>3</sup> كوميك لأجل سوريا (*Kūmīk li-ʿaḡl Sūrīyyā*) was born as a Facebook page on 6 July 2012 in response to the brutality of the Al-ʿAsad government against the Syrian people.

To date, the page has 19.131 “likes” and 19.300 followers<sup>4</sup>. The number of comics varies, as new comics are added periodically and some are sometimes removed.

In creating the stories of their comics, the young artists refer to real events, press articles, demonstrations and protests. In the information section of the page, the authors have inserted a sentence that summarizes the reasons of this comic collective, that is: “Stories and anecdotes inspired by the great Syrian revolution, written, sketched and drawn by free people, dedicated to every soul that yearns for freedom and dignity anywhere in the world”.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/teenbaal>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Comic4Syria>.

<sup>4</sup> Date of last consultation: 12/09/2022.

In the “photos” section we can find all comics; they are numerous and share the issues, which generally concern the violence of the government and the police on citizens, demonstrators and the repercussions that war has on people’s souls, in particular on children.

The designs and styles are all different from each other, this may be a clue that many illustrators have worked on the project. Unfortunately the names of the authors are unknown and the comics are anonymous for political reasons.

The comics are all written in Syrian Arabic, among those currently present on the facebook page we find: *Šahīd... qīṣṣa qaṣīra* “Martyr... a story” (2012); *Kātū l-mīlād* “Birthday cake” (2012); *Qannāṣ ṣīndamā taqtul... taqtul nafs-aka* “Sniper: When you kill... you kill yourself” (2012); *Bard* “Cold” (2012) accompanied by the description of the post: “A true story that happened at the beginning of the revolution... it took place in Darṣa”; *Al-qīṭṭa* “The cat” (2013); *Al-ʔumm* “The mother” (2013). Many of the stories present in *Comic4 Syria* are inspired by real events and we can give some of these a date and a place, for example: *Kīmāwī* “Chemist” (2013), by virtue of its title and story, relates to the episode of 21 August 2013 in Ġūṭa, in which Baššār al-ʔAsad strikes with missiles containing the chemical agent sarin some rebel areas in the southern part of Damascus during the war.

In the Syrian comic strips the content is all about social criticism and the government complaint and the use of the image allows a simplification of the message, accentuated by the adoption of the Arabic dialect.

#### 4. *Kōktēl* “Cocktail”

Inside the FB *Comic4 Syria* page we find the comic *Kōktēl* (2013)<sup>5</sup> which narrates, in nine pages, the friendship between an Alawite boy Ḥussayn and a Sunni Aḥmad. Friends from childhood, the two protagonists find themselves related to the two faces of Syria, one pro Bashar and the other pro revolution. After the childhood spent together, the two boys will move away because of their different origins and political ideas, one loyal to the Alawite government, the other activist and pro-revolution. In the end, however, they will find themselves united by the same feelings and will toast their friendship with a Cocktail. More information on the origin of the two young men is given at the end, in which Hussayn claims that he comes from Jable and Aḥmad from Aš-šūḡūr a neighborhood located in Damascus.

The author of the comic plays with varieties of the Syrian Arabic, using for Hussayn the Alawite dialect because the character comes from the coastal town

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<sup>5</sup> It can be found, in the English version, in the text *Syria Speaks* winner of the EnglishPen 2018 award.

of Jable, which has an Alawite majority. The Alawites moved down from the mountains and from the surrounding rural areas to province on the western coast, most concentrated in the Latakia but also Tartus, Jable, etc., though there are small numbers in Turkey, Israel, Lebanon.

The Alawite dialect is a rural variety and is included in the group of coastal dialects of Syria. Concerning the studies on the dialects of the west coast, Procházka (2013) collected data and provided a linguistic analysis on the dialect of the island of Arwād. Behnstedt (2009) in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, under the entry 'Syria', dedicates a section to the coastal dialects of Syria. Other sources on the *sāhil* dialects are represented by the dictionary *Mawsūʿat al-ṣāmmiyya s-sūriyya* written by ʿAbd ar-Raḥīm (2003) and from the information provided by Behnstedt *Sprachatlas von Syrien* (1997).

Among the studies on Alawite communities and their dialect it is worth mentioning Procházka-Eisl, Procházka (2010), Procházka (2015), Behnstedt (1997) who presents an accurate classification of the Arabic dialect of Latakia in the Coastal Dialects group (in his *Sprachatlas von Syrien*), Klimiuk (2011, 2015) who dealt with the Arabic of Latakia with considerations also on the Alawite variety and Werner (1998, 2006) who examined the Arab of the province of Antioch making references to the Alawite variety<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to using the language spoken every day, the artist also uses standard Arabic in some contexts: in the case of the reproduction of the news, the author adopts a high register that tends to standard Arabic.

#### 4.1. Notes

In the transcription of Arabic spoken by characters of Alawite origin (Husseyin and family, military), the phoneme / q / is rendered as a uvular [q], a typical feature of the Alawite dialect and not as a voiceless laryngeal occlusive [ʔ] (as in general occurs in the urban speeches of the Mashreq).

Regarding Ahmed's speech, clearly a Sunni boy, from the phonetic and phonological point of view some typical characteristics of the Damascus variety have been reproduced.

About the graphematic aspect, having no formal recognition, the various Arabic dialects are affected by a lack of spelling conventions: this factor is also manifested in the texts of comics, in which each author invents a graphematic rendering.

The phoneme / q / at the graphematic level is always reported, even when Ahmed (from Damascus) speaks, but in this case in the phonetic transcription

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<sup>6</sup> Dima Wannus in her novel *الخائفون Al-ḥāʾifūna* (2017) *The Frightened Ones* inserts the Alawite dialect. She describes the life of a young woman in Damascus during the civil war who receives a manuscript by a former lover who fled to Germany.

/q/ has been rendered as voiceless occlusive laryngal /ʔ/. The graphematic aspect is mostly influenced by the phonetics of the dialect as in the case of interdentalals which are made occlusive, for example *ktīr* كثير with /t/ instead of *ktīr* كثير with /t̪/.

In other cases, on the contrary, it is Standard Arabic that interferes in writing: the writing reflects the interdental of Standard Arabic as in the case of the verb *tabat* ثبت “to demonstrate” written by the interdental /t̪/.

The original comic will be reproduced below with the transcription and the translation then an analysis of the text will be carried out.



**Fig. 1**

- *M-aqəl-lak ʕammel-lī bās la-hōnī...!*
- *Fašarət... ʒarreb tāḥod-ha mən-nī*
- I'm telling you to pass me (literally: give me a lift) here!
- You wish... Try getting it!



**Fig. 2**

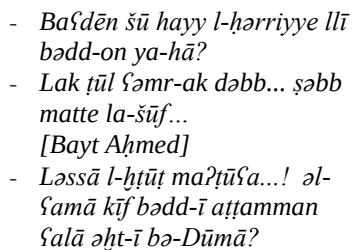
- *W-lāk Husseyn! qūm ʔtlāṣ ktōb wazāyef-ak ... yṣaddem-nī yā-k!*
- *Dēr bāl-ak!*
- Hey you, Husseyn! Come up and do your homework, damn you!
- Be careful!



**Fig. 3**

- *Bə-ḥazz-ī ənn-ak kwayyes... akalt əṣ-šahḥāṭa ṣan-nī.*
- [*Baṣḍa kam sana*]
- *Ēmāt bədd-ak ʔthalles muḥāḍara? ṣāzem-ak ṣā-kōktēl!*
- *W-mən-lak əl-maṣārī w-lā?*
- *La-(h) yā šrīk, maṣ-ī 120 līra.*
- I swear you're a good (boy), you took the slipper for me!
- [A few years later]
- When do you finish class? I would like to offer you a cocktail (lit.: I invite you to a cocktail).
- Do you have the money (lit.: where do you get the money from) or not?
- I have it, my friend, I have 120 lira.

- [ʔaɖār 2011 ɡurfat Hʊssayn]
- Lak ya zalame rašš-(h)ōn rašš  
bə-Darʕā!! Nās ʃarhet  
ħərriyye! Lak šū yaʕnī?
- W-lak maʕqūl ʔmaʕaddeq ha-l-  
ħakī? Žēs-nā a-byaʕmel  
hēkī...



- In Daraa they made a shower of bullets at people shouting “freedom”! What do you think?
- And do you think it is logical to believe this story? Our army doesn't do that!
- And then, what is this freedom they want?
- You've always been an idiot... pour me some Maté, come on...

[Ahmed's house]

- - The phone lines are still off! Damn how can I reassure me about my sister in Douma?





**Fig. 5**

[Bayt Hussayn]

- TV: *ḍabaṭat al-ḡihāt al-muḥtaṣṣa nafaq-an yaḥtawī ṣalā l-ṣadīd min al-ṣasliḥa wa ḍ-ḍaḥā'ir... yaṣīlu bayna Darṣā wa l-ʔUrdun... wa ʔalqat al-qabḍ ṣalā al-ʔirhābīyyina...*
- *ēh mā qaṣṣartū bə-hā-l-ʔklāb hadōlī...!*
- *Maṣqūlī qəṣṣat ən-nafaq?*
- *Ṭabṣān maṣqūlī...!*
- *Hussayn! ana nāzel muzāhara*
- *Šū? Bədd-ak tənzel maṣ hadōlī l-muḥrimīn?*
- *Rūḥ ṣan-nā yaaa!!!!*

[Hussey'n's house]

- (TV): *The competent authorities have located a tunnel that contains a large amount of weapons and ammunition and which reaches between Daraa and Jordan and carried out the arrest of the terrorists.*
- Well done (lit.: you haven't done wrong) with these dogs!
- Does the tunnel story make sense?
- Of course it makes sense!
- Hussey'n, I'm going down to protest!
- What? Do you want to join these criminals?
- Get out of here!



**Fig. 6**

- [*ḥərriyye, ḥərriyye*]  
 - *°Msəkū-lī ha-l-kərr...!*
- [Freedom, freedom!]  
 - Bring me that donkey!



**Fig. 7**

- *La-ṣamā!! M-yəqtulū Aḥmed...!*  
 - *A-biṣīr hēk ya šabāb!*  
 - *A-biṣīr hēk mā yā ḥaywān!! Wahhhuu*
- Damn, they're killing Ahmed!  
 - Come on guys, don't do that!  
 - "Don't do this" how? Take that animal!! Wah!



Fig. 8

- *W-lak šū žāb-ak la-hōn?*
- *Kənt žāyē asbet-lak ənn-ō l-amʔn a-byaʕmlū hēk...*
- *Mən wēn ənte?*
- *Mən əš-Šāgūr*
- *W-ənte yā ḥaywān?*
- *Mən Žable yā sayyed-ī...*
- *Mən Žable yā kərr...?*
- *Wallahi la-faržī-k qīmt-ak.*
- What are you doing here?
- I was coming to show you that security forces don't do that...
- Where do you come from?
- From Al-Shagour.
- And you, animal?
- From Jable, sir.
- From Jable, donkey! I'll show you your value.



Fig. 9

- *[ʔamām al-qašr al-ʕadliyy... baʕda 60 yawm]*
- *Ḥamdulillah ʕā-s-salāme šrīk*
- *Yā zalame mabsūūūūūū, lā tasāl-nī lēš...! Bass mərtāāāāāḥ...*
- *Šū...kōktēl w mā saʔalnā?*
- *Ēh fī bə-žēbt-ī 150 līra*
- *Lā, ṭābeš-ha ktīr... yaʕdah ḥārīš-ak šū andabūrī*
- [60 days later, in front of the courthouse]
- Thank God we're safe man.
- Friend, I'm happy, don't ask me why! But I'm relieved.
- So... Cocktail and to hell with it all?

- Yes... yes... I have 150 lira in my pocket.
- (No), you exaggerate (lit.: you have expanded)! Damn you, poor fellow!

## 5. Analysis

### 5.1. Morphological aspects

A distinctive feature of the Alawite dialect is the rendering of the concomitant present by the preverb *m-* rather than *ʕam-*. This characteristic is also found in the dialect of the island of Arwād, as evidenced by the study by Procházka (2013).

Examples taken from the *corpus*:

Fig. 1

- *m-aqəl-lak* “I’m telling you”.

Fig. 7

- *m-yaqtulū* “they are killing”.

Another peculiarity consists in the negation of the verbal sentence by *a-* followed by the verb, instead of *mā-*. In the corpus there are examples of the Alawite characters which use *a-* for the negation, as shown in the following sentences:

Fig. 7

*a-bīṣīr* (lit.) “it doesn’t happen”.

Fig. 8

*a-byaʕmlū* “they don’t do”.

Fig. 4

*a-byaʕmel* “it doesn’t do”.

### 5.2. Lexical aspects

At the lexical level we find the interrogative pronoun *ēmāt* (Fig. 3) typical of rural dialects, instead of the common *emtā* used mostly in urban varieties.

In general, in the corpus we find a loan only once: in the expression *ʕammel-lī bās* (Fig. 1), the word *bās* is a loan from the English “pass”. The word *Kōktēl* entered in Arabic vocabulary (and in all languages).

### 5.3. Colloquial expressions and idioms

About colloquial expressions and idioms we report below some examples taken from the corpus:

Fig. 1

- *fašar<sup>7</sup>t* “You wish” is an exclamation used in Syrian Arabic, it is comparable to standard Arabic: *ḥasiʔta* “go away!”.

Fig. 2

- *yšaddem-nī yā-k!* “damn you!”, literally “may God deprive me of you”; it is a curse, sometimes used by mothers against their children as in this case.

- *dēr bāl-ak!* “Pay attention” (lit.: “turn your attention, mind”), is a very common expression used throughout the Syrian-Lebanese and Palestinian area.

Fig. 3

- *bə-ḥazz-ī ənn-ak kwayyes* “I swear you’re a good (boy)”. *Bə-ḥazz-ī* “I swear” (Barthélemy, 1935: 400).

- *akalt əš-šaḥḥāta ʕan-nī*: “you took the slipper in my place”; it is a way of saying, lit.: *akalt* means “you ate”. The use of the verb “to eat” as a substitute for “take, receive” slaps, blows, kicks is widespread, as in the expressions: *akalū kaff* in the sense of “they took a slap” (lit.: “they ate a hand”) or *akal ɖarbe* in the sense of “he took a blow” lit.: “he ate a blow”.

Fig. 4

- *lak tūl ʕəmr-ak dəbb... šəbb matte la-šūf...* “You have always been an idiot... pour me some Maté<sup>7</sup> come on...”, literally *dəbb* means “bear”. The comparison with the bear has a negative meaning as the bear is considered an animal with little intelligence.

- *la-ʕamā!*: “damnation” (it literally means “blindness”); it is repeated twice in the comic and is an imprecation, conventionally used to curse someone.

Fig. 6

- *kərr* “donkey” repeated several times in the text is a term used in Syrian Arabic in an offensive way.

Fig. 8

- *wallahi la-farž-ī-k qīmt-ak*. “I’ll show you your value”. The quadriconsonantal verb of the final weak *faržā* means “to show”, *la-* before the verb gives a sense of the immediate future.

Fig. 9

- *šū...kōktēl w mā saʔalnā* “So... Cocktail and to hell with it all?”: this expression used in common jargon literally means “we didn’t ask” in the sense of “let’s just do it”, “we don’t need to ask anyone”.

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<sup>7</sup> Maté is a drink originating from Central and South America, used mostly in western Syria.

-*lā t̤abeš-ha kt̤ir*...: it is a common saying and it can be translated as “you exaggerate”, (“you’re too generous”). Consulting the dictionarie Barthélemy (1935: 409): *ṭabaš yaṭboš* “throw something on the ground”; *ṭabaš ʔl-bāb*: “slam the door”; *ṭabbaš* “break”.

- *yaḥdaḥ ḥarīš-ak* “You’ll be damned”, “damn you” or also “shame on you”. The sentence is used in an offensive, derogatory way, in this case in a playful and good-natured sense, but it is difficult to render in another language. The original expression is *yaḥdaḥ ḥarīm-ak* (*ḥadaḥa* “burden on, oppress, ruin”); the word *ḥarīm* means “women of the family”, this statement literally means “may your woman be dishonored (may God dishonor your wife)”. Due to the very offensive meaning, the expression is rephrased as *yaḥdaḥ ḥarīš-ak*, with the term *ḥarīš* “centipede”, thus creating an assonance to avoid vulgar expression.

- *šū andabūrī*: a term widely used in the Arabic spoken in the Syrian-Palestinian area which means “man without money”, “poor man” (Chaker-Sultani & Milelli 2010: 52). It is probably a word that comes from the Turkish which means precisely “poor”, “homeless” and indicates the one who went around the neighborhood with a drum. The word *andabūrī* is often used in conjunction with *nūrī*, that is *nūrī andabūrī*.

## 6. Conclusion

During the Syrian revolution comics became an essential tool for the artists to express their ideas, their dissent and often to report the events that occurred during the war.

Halasa, Omareen, Mahfoud (2014) points out that the anonymous web group *Comic4 Syria* led a growing artistic revolutionary movement that encouraged dialogue, debate and free expression.

In this work we analyzed *Comic4 Syria* collective in particular the comic *Kōktēl*, considered particularly significant both in terms of language and content.

Through the analyzed corpus it is possible to make linguistic and sociolinguistic reflections. We can conclude with the following considerations:

- the characters express themselves in the Arabic dialect of their area. The author was careful to emphasize the Alawite variety spoken by one of the two protagonists, his family and the military; it is significant because it indicates not only religious but also political belonging to the leader, unlike the other Sunni character speaks an urban dialect, exactly the Damascus variety.

- TV characters use standard Arabic.

What emerged therefore respects the division of the communicative functions of the two registers of the Arabic language. The language used in the comic analyzed reflects the reality of the linguistic situation in the Arab world.

Furthermore, the text can represent a source for linguistic reflections on the Alawite dialect used in the western regions of Syria. Among the peculiar features of the Alawite variety we find: the preverb *m-* to render the concomitant present and *a-* followed by the verb to express the negation of the verbal sentence.

The collection of this kind of texts can become a resource for morphological, syntactic and lexical information about Arabic dialects.

From the analysis of the corpus, colloquial expressions and sayings emerge. In the daily life of the Arab world, idiomatic expressions play a very important role (greetings, requests, thanks, wishes, various exclamations, curses); even the idioms of popular tradition can reveal further aspects of Arab culture.

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