

Re: Telling time in Tunisia: the "drej"

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Alan wrote:

"Dr. Jamshid Ibrahim" wrote

Alan wrote:

Years ago I spent a summer in Tunisia and became aware of a rather odd method of expressing time that did not obtain at all in Egypt or in Yemen (regions whose Arabic I am much more familiar with).

In addition to the rather widespread use of words for "quarter" and "half", the Tunisians also expressed time in terms of the "drej" which is a unit of 20 minutes:

5:20 = khamisa wa drej (five and a "drej")
5:40 = khamisa wa derjayn (five and "two drej")
5:40 = sitta gheer drej (six lacking a "drej")

Is this unit of time found in any other Arabic dialect? Or in any other language group? And what would be the origin and history of that unit of time?

Thanks in advance . . .

Alan: It is really impressive to see you have seen all these places. I am afraid I don't know what "drej" is. Could it be a corruption of the Arabic word "daraja" step? You know North Africans often corrupt the Arabic language (no evaluation is intended). The way of saying it

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reminds me of the French way of saying ninety "quatre-vingt-dix".
Telling the time like months varies from Arab country to Arab country.
You may know that the old Arabs referred to she-camel "na:qa" for
telling the time. The period a she-camel needed to give milk was
measured. Telling the time has also to do with counting. As you know
some primitive (natural) languages don't seem to have a need to count
more than three. I mean even in English words like: a few, few, a
little, little, some, several....., show this ambivalence or
uncertainty.
Regards
Jamshid

Yes, I'm pretty sure that "drej" is related, as you say, to "daraja" meaning
"step", but what possessed the Tunisians, I wonder, to "step" the hour into
thirds, or 20-minute "steps"?

Apart from the semantics, would daraja > drej be a regular phonological
development in Tunisian Arabic?

The first thing that occurred to me, being largely ignorant of Arabic,
was that a reflex of Latin tertius 'third' might be involved (e.g.
Italian terzo). Have you checked to see if they do this in Maltese?

Ross Clark

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