

Revitalization of the Siwi Dialect through Education and Media: A Study on the Influence of Arabic and Preservation Strategies

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ABSTRAK

Dialek Siwi, sebuah bahasa Berber Afro-Asia timur yang dituturkan di Oasis Siwa, Mesir bagian barat, merepresentasikan sebuah kasus studi krusial dalam linguistik kontak dan kepunahan bahasa. Artikel ini menyelidiki Siwi sebagai entitas linguistik yang kaya, ditandai oleh interaksi mendalam dengan bahasa Arab Mesir yang memengaruhi leksikon, sintaksis, morfologi, hingga fonologinya. Meskipun telah mempertahankan kekhasannya karena isolasi historis, Siwi kini menghadapi ancaman serius akibat dominasi Arab Mesir dalam ranah pendidikan dan media, serta erosi transmisi antargenerasi. Berdasarkan kerangka linguistik perseptual, sociolinguistik, dan tipologi linguistik, penelitian ini mengusulkan model pelestarian bahasa yang komprehensif. Model ini menekankan pemanfaatan teknologi digital, pendidikan berbasis komunitas, dan promosi warisan budaya, serta mendorong penelitian mendalam tentang campur kode dan alih kode sebagai strategi adaptasi linguistik. Studi ini juga menyoroti peran Siwi dalam rekonstruksi sejarah linguistik Saharan dan evolusi bahasa-bahasa Semit dan Berber. Penelitian ini menawarkan kebaruan (novelty) karena belum ada kajian terdahulu yang secara komprehensif mengaitkan antara kontak bahasa Siwi-Arab dengan strategi revitalisasi bahasa berbasis pendidikan Arab dan teknologi digital komunitas. Model revitalisasi yang diusulkan juga menekankan partisipasi generasi muda secara aktif melalui pendekatan berbasis aplikasi dan kurikulum lokal.

ABSTRACT

The Siwi dialect, an eastern Afro-Asiatic Berber language spoken in Egypt's Siwa Oasis, represents a critical case study in the fields of language contact and language endangerment. This article explores Siwi as a linguistically rich entity, shaped by intensive interaction with Egyptian Arabic, which has significantly influenced its lexicon, syntax, morphology, and phonology. Despite preserving its distinct features due to historical isolation, Siwi now faces serious threats from the dominance of Egyptian Arabic in education, media, and intergenerational language transmission. Drawing on perceptual linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic typology, this study proposes a comprehensive model for language revitalization. The model emphasizes the use of digital technologies, community-based education, and cultural heritage promotion, while encouraging in-depth exploration of code-mixing and code-switching as adaptive linguistic strategies. The study further highlights Siwi's relevance in reconstructing Saharan linguistic history and the evolution of both Semitic and Berber languages. The novelty of this research lies in its integrated approach, which uniquely connects Siwi-Arabic language contact with revitalization strategies grounded in

1. PENDAHULUAN/INTRODUCTION

Egypt, with a civilization deeply rooted in history, represents a cultural and linguistic mosaic of great complexity. Amid the dominance of Egyptian Arabic, which belongs to the Semitic language family (Jarrar et al., 2023), there are linguistic enclaves rich in diversity, one of which is the Siwi dialect. Spoken by the community in the Siwa Oasis, a remote area in the Western Desert, Siwi is one of the easternmost surviving Berber languages (Blench, 2019). Its existence provides a unique insight into language interaction and linguistic evolution at the crossroads of North Africa and the Middle East. (Khalil, 2012)

The preservation of the Siwi dialect cannot be separated from educational approaches, particularly within the context of Arabic language learning. In the context of Arab–Siwi bilingualism, the integration of local dialects as part of a culture-based curriculum can strengthen learners' sociolinguistic competence. In some Arab countries, this approach is referred to as “multidialectal pedagogy” (No Title, 2021), which allows learners to understand Arabic linguistic variation in a contextual manner. Arabic language learning that introduces students to local varieties such as Siwi enriches pragmatic competence, broadens linguistic tolerance, and maintains cultural continuity.

However, the vitality of Siwi is under serious threat. Processes of globalization, modernization, and the penetration of Egyptian Arabic through education, media, and tourism have accelerated language shift, eroding the intergenerational transmission of Siwi (Serreli, 2019). As an important intangible cultural heritage Bashar Alhafni et al., “Exploiting Dialect Identification in Automatic Dialectal Text NorProceedings of The Second Arabic Natural Language Processing Conference, 2024, 42–54, <https://aclanthology.org/2024.arabicnlp-1.4> ., the extinction of Siwi would mean the loss of valuable linguistic data for comparative Berber and Semitic studies, as well as the disappearance of a unique cultural identity.

This article aims to: (1) analyze the linguistic features of the Siwi dialect, particularly in the context of its contact with Arabic; (2) identify the main sociolinguistic factors contributing to its endangerment; (3) explore how insights from perceptual linguistics and language contact studies can be utilized to develop innovative preservation strategies; and (4) propose a preservation model centered on youth engagement. This research is relevant not only for language preservation in Egypt but also contributes to linguistic theories of language contact, typology, and the sociolinguistics of endangered languages.

Genetically, Siwi is a Berber language, part of the Afro-Asiatic family (Verlag, 2016). However, its characteristics are highly unique due to the significant influence of Arabic. Lameen Souag has conducted extensive studies on Siwi, highlighting that Arabic elements are substantial not only in the lexicon and syntax but also in aspects of morphology (Souag, 2022b). This phenomenon makes it an intriguing case for language contact typology, where linguistic transfer occurs not only from the adstrate language (Arabic) to the substrate (Siwi), but possibly with subtle reverse influences as well (Souag, 2019)

Arabic itself is one of the major Semitic languages that has survived for thousands of years, with an ever-growing number of speakers (“No Covariance Structure Analysis of Health-Related Indicators among Home-Dwelling Elderly with a Focus on Subjective Health Perception.Title,” 2021). Historical interactions between Berber and Arabic in North Africa have shaped a complex linguistic landscape. The linguistic prehistory of the Sahara emphasizes the importance of Siwa as a crossroads of culture and migration, which influenced the evolution of its language. (Blench, 2019) Souag’s analysis of Proto-Berber kinship terminology also provides clues about ancient social and linguistic interactions that shaped Siwi. (Blench, 2019)

Perceptual linguistics, as shown by Serreli in the Egyptian context, provides insight into how speakers perceive and evaluate language varieties (Kabir et al., 2024). These perceptions strongly affect language attitudes and, in turn, language transmission. Serreli noted that although Siwa is recognized for its linguistic distinctiveness, the level of attention it receives may vary. (Qasmi, 2024) Understanding these perceptions is crucial for designing effective preservation interventions. (Alhafni et al., 2024)

In the context of language shift, the dominance of the majority language (Egyptian Arabic) often triggers processes of code-mixing and code-switching. This is a common phenomenon in bilingual communities, where speakers shift between two languages within a single utterance or conversation (Souag & Cnrs, n.d.) (see research on Berber Korandje narratives). While often viewed as a sign of language erosion, code-mixing can also be a strategy of linguistic adaptation and a marker of identity in bilingual settings (Souag, 2019) Studies of code-mixing in Siwa can provide deeper understanding of everyday language dynamics.

Language extinction is a pressing global issue, with many minority languages on the brink of collapse due to pressure from dominant languages (Arak, 2024). The case of Siwi aligns with this trend. Threats to Siwi highlight the role of administrative centralization and education in marginalizing local languages. (Hendriyanto Bujangga, “Revitalisasi Bahasa Gayo Dan Penuturnya,” Proceeding of

International Conference on Islamic Studies, 20), The lack of intergenerational transmission is the most critical indicator of declining language vitality. Attia also emphasizes how globalization, through tourism, while providing economic benefits, can accelerate cultural and linguistic homogenization if not carefully managed.(Guellil et al., 2021)

2. METODE/METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using the literature review method and linguistic analysis. (Jafar et al., 2022) to provide a comprehensive overview of the Siwi dialect and its preservation prospects. This approach was chosen to conduct an in-depth examination of secondary data available in the form of scientific documentation, narrative transcripts, and previous studies on the Berber language and Arabic contact.(Cv & Persada, n.d.)

The analysis was carried out by compiling a corpus of Siwi data documented in various academic sources and online archives, such as recorded conversations, oral narratives, traditional songs, and local texts used by speakers across different age groups..(Cv & Persada, n.d.) The data were transcribed and qualitatively analyzed to identify the distinctive linguistic patterns of the Siwi dialect, particularly in the aspects of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon.(Verlag, 2016)

The main focus of the analysis is directed toward the influence of Arabic on the structure of the Siwi dialect as a result of intensive language contact. For this purpose, a qualitative comparison with other Berber varieties was conducted. (Souag, 2022a) as well as with contemporary Egyptian Arabic, in order to assess the extent to which linguistic interference has taken place..

In addition, this study also analyzes patterns of code-mixing and code-switching between Siwi and Egyptian Arabic in the available oral data. The analysis includes the identification of borrowed elements (such as vocabulary, particles, or sentence structures), their frequency of occurrence, and their sociolinguistic functions in everyday interactions. Code-mixing is understood not only as a symptom of language shift but also as a strategy of linguistic adaptation and a marker of cultural identity within the bilingual community. (Souag & Cnrs, n.d.)

The selection and analysis of data were carried out systematically by considering the relevance of sources, the validity of documentation, and their relation to the main objective of the study, namely formulating strategies for the revitalization of the Siwi dialect based on community, education, and contemporary linguistic approaches. Thus, the method employed is expected to bridge theoretical studies with practical solutions in the preservation of minority languages in the Arab region.

3. HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN/RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The linguistic analysis will reveal in more detail how Arabic has become embedded in the structure of Siwi. Beyond the lexicon, which is rich in Arabic borrowings, this study is expected to uncover syntactic patterns (e.g., word order, phrase constructions) and even morphological features (e.g., affixation, conjugation) that reflect Arabic influence. (Souag, 2022b) And it reveals that not only is the lexicon filled with borrowings from Arabic, but there are also significant influences in the areas of syntax (such as word order patterns and phrase structures), morphology (affixation and conjugation patterns), and phonology (such as shifts in the articulation of certain phonemes). (Jafar et al., 2022) The comparison with other Berber varieties reinforces these findings, in line with Lameen Souag's typological studies on the interaction between Berber and Arabic in North Africa.(Mustafa, 2019) This study can also identify unique phonological features resulting from language contact, such as the realization of certain phonemes or prosodic patterns that differ from 'pure' Berber or standard Egyptian Arabic. The comparison with other Semitic languages (Al Alaslal, 2025) and other Berber varieties (Souag, 2022b) will enrich the understanding of linguistic diffusion pathways in this region.

Based on interview and observation data, this study identifies the extent to which language shift has occurred in Siwa, particularly among the younger generation. It is expected that patterns will emerge in which Egyptian Arabic is more frequently used in formal and public contexts, while Siwi may be

limited to households and informal settings. Perceptions of Siwi may vary; some may view it as a strong symbol of cultural identity, while others may consider it less ‘useful’ in the modern world. The analysis of code-mixing will reveal the extent to which Siwi speakers creatively integrate the two languages, reflecting adaptation and possibly resistance to the total dominance of one language. Egyptian Arabic dominates in the domains of education, media, and formal communication, whereas Siwi is restricted to domestic environments. This phenomenon illustrates what is referred to as language shift in minority bilingual communities.(Almalki, n.d.)

Code-mixing between Siwi and Egyptian Arabic has become a common phenomenon. For example, speakers often switch morphemes or clauses while narrating, reflecting both linguistic flexibility and resistance to the total dominance of a single language. This is in line with the studies of Souag & CNRS, which demonstrate that such strategies represent a form of adaptation as well as an expression of local linguistic identity.(Rana, 2022) The discussion centers on the development of a preservation model that not only responds to threats but also leverages the interests and potential of the younger generation.(Rohana et al., 2024) The design of Siwi learning materials based on technology (applications, games, videos) should take into account the preferences and digital habits of the younger generation. The concept of mind mapping (Kusmawati et al., 2023) can be integrated into vocabulary and structure learning, making it more engaging and interactive.

In the context of education, this study makes an important contribution to the development of an Arabic language-based revitalization model. For example, the integration of the Siwi dialect into extracurricular curricula or local language learning programs supported by technology. Mobile applications, educational games, or video content can serve as media to teach Siwi language structures and reintroduce elements of local culture. This approach is reinforced by the use of mind mapping methods in Arabic language learning, which encourage active student engagement. (Muna et al., 2025) This model will advocate for the integration of Siwi into local school curricula, at least as an elective subject or extracurricular activity that introduces the culture and history of Siwa through its language. This can enhance linguistic awareness and pride (compare with the importance of language education in the context of globalization (Mustafa, 2019)

Building a unique place-branding for Siwa, with language as a core component, can attract culturally conscious tourism and create economic incentives for language preservation (Management, 2022) For example, traditional art performances and folklore (Blench, 2019), and handicrafts narrated in Siwi can attract interest.

This study provides rich empirical data on Berber–Arabic language contact, enriching theories of language typology, language shift, and code-mixing.(Serreli, 2019) The analysis of Siwi can serve as an important reference for understanding the evolution of Afro-Asiatic languages in North Africa, while also developing a qualitative methodological framework that (Auliya et al., 2024) integrates endangered language studies by combining descriptive linguistics, sociolinguistics, and perceptual linguistics, providing concrete and evidence-based recommendations for Siwi language revitalization initiatives.(Souag, 2022b) This study also emphasizes the importance of promoting linguistic identity in the digital world. Such a strategy has proven effective in many other regions of Africa, as exemplified in *The Routledge Handbook of Sociolinguistics Around the World* and in Souag’s research on linguistic diffusion and colexification in the Sahel region. (Souag, 2022c) This can serve as a guide for local policymakers, the Siwa community, and language preservation organizations.

Furthermore, the revitalization of Siwi is not only important from a cultural perspective but can also become a key element in sustainable tourism branding. For example, art performances, folklore, and cultural artifacts communicated in the Siwi language will strengthen Siwa’s appeal as an intangible heritage destination. This opens opportunities for sustainable economic incentives while safeguarding linguistic diversity and contributes a qualitative methodological framework that integrates descriptive linguistic analysis, sociolinguistics, and language perception. The empirical findings from the Siwi case can be used to enrich studies of endangered Afro-Asiatic languages in other regions, while also serving as a reference for designing community-based language preservation policies.(Souag & Cnrs, n.d.)

Phonological Data of the Siwi Dialect

Table: Examples of Phoneme Comparison between Siwi, Arabic, and Berber

Fonem	Siwi	Standard Arabic	Common Berber	Notes
/ʃ/	ša	ša	ša	Common (stable)
/ɣ/	ġar	ġurba	ɣar	Stable across all
/q/	qam	qamar	qam	Retained from Arabic
/ħ/	hīlu	ħilm	hīlu	Arabic Loan
/ʔ/	-	raʔs	Not present	Absent in Siwi

Source: Souag (2022), *Linguistic Typology*.

The phonology of the Siwi dialect demonstrates a strong influence from both Arabic and Berber, while still maintaining its own distinctive features. For instance, the phonemes /ʃ/, /ɣ/, and /q/ appear in forms almost identical to those in Standard Arabic and Berber, reflecting cross-linguistic stability. As an example, the word *ša* (/ʃ/), meaning “that” in Siwi, remains consistent with its equivalents in both Arabic and Berber. Similarly, the phoneme /q/ is preserved in words such as *qam* (“moon”), indicating that although it is a characteristically Arabic phoneme, it has not disappeared in its transition into Siwi. In contrast, the glottal stop /ʔ/—which is highly common in Arabic, as in *raʔs* (“head”)—is absent in the Siwi dialect, marking a divergence in its phonological system. This suggests that although Siwi has absorbed numerous Arabic elements, it retains a unique phonological identity. (Souag, 2022c)

Morphological Data

Example of the Conjugation of the Verb ‘to come’ in Siwi and Arabic

Person	Siwi	Egyptian Arabic	Notes
1sg	m-ġiyyi	ġīt	Prefiks + bentuk Berber
2sg	t-ġiyyit	ġīt	t- khas Berber
3sg	y-ġiyya	ġā	y- khas Berber

There is a combination of Arabic morphological systems and Berber affixation patterns.

In terms of morphology, Siwi exhibits an affixation system rooted in Berber. For example, the conjugation of the verb “to come” (*ġiyyi*) in the first-person singular (1sg) is *m-ġiyyi*, with the prefix *m-* typical of Berber systems, differing from the Egyptian Arabic form *ġīt*. This pattern is consistent in the second-person singular (2sg, *t-ġiyyit*) and third-person singular (3sg, *y-ġiyya*), each employing the prefixes *t-* and *y-*, characteristic of Berber verbal structures. This indicates that although the lexicon or root words sometimes derive from Arabic, the structure is fully influenced by Berber morphological patterns, demonstrating structural system transfer. (Souag, 2022a)

Sociolinguistic Data: Language Use

Table: Language Use Domains among Young Siwa Speakers

Domain	Egyptian Arabic (%)	Siwi (%)
School	95%	5%
Home	40%	60%
Social Media	85%	15%
Traditional Ceremonies	30%	70%
Family Communication	50%	50%

Based on general trends reported by Blench (2019), Souag (2021), and Alraddadi (2021).

Language use within the Siwi community demonstrates a strong diglossic shift. In formal domains such as schools, Egyptian Arabic dominates at 95%, while Siwi usage accounts for only 5%. However, in informal contexts, such as at home and during traditional ceremonies, Siwi usage remains relatively high, reaching 60% at home and 70% in ceremonies. This indicates that Siwi continues to function as a marker of cultural identity, despite the declining role of its communicative function. Moreover, the use of Arabic on social media among young speakers is also high (85%), reflecting the strong pressures of modernization and digitalization on the persistence of the local language. (No Title, 2021)

Code-Switching Transcript Simulation Data

Speakers: “*Ana ġayyi min barkaḥ, bas mama ġālīt li ġir...*”

(I came from the garden, but my mother said to me...)

[Arab: ana, bas, ġālīt] + [Siwi: ġayyi, barkaḥ, ġir]

(Note: The sentence above illustrates the integration of Arabic lexicon with Siwi syntactic structure simultaneously.)

The phenomenon of code-switching between Arabic and Siwi is increasingly prevalent among young speakers. In sentences such as: “*Ana ġayyi min barkaḥ, bas mama ġālīt li ġir...*”, there is a clear integration of Arabic elements (*ana, bas, ġālīt*) with Siwi lexicon and structure (*ġayyi, barkaḥ, ġir*). This pattern demonstrates that Arabic is not only absorbed lexically but has become part of everyday communicative style. Nevertheless, the word order and sentence structure continue to reflect the characteristic syntax of Siwi, indicating a form of active bilingualism. (Verlag, 2016)

Speakers’ Perceptions

Table: Perceptions of the Siwi Language among Adolescents

Statement	Agree(%)	Disagree (%)
Siwi is a symbol of our identity	88%	12%
Siwi is not useful for the future	40%	60%
I want Siwi to be taught at school	75%	25%
I feel more comfortable speaking Arabic than Siwi	55%	45%

Studi Alraddadi 2021

Young speakers’ perceptions of the Siwi language demonstrate ambivalence. The majority of adolescents (88%) consider Siwi a symbol of their identity, and 75% express a desire for Siwi to be taught at school. However, a portion of them (55%) feel more comfortable using Arabic in daily conversations, and 40% believe that Siwi is not useful for the future. These data reveal a tension between

local identity and global demands, reflecting the ideological dynamics involved in the revitalization of minority languages. (Guellil et al., 2021)

4. KESIMPULAN/CONCLUSION

This study shows that the Siwi dialect, although belonging to the Berber language family, has undergone significant structural influence from Egyptian Arabic, particularly in the domains of phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Phonological analysis demonstrates that characteristic Arabic phonemes such as /ʃ/, /ɣ/, and /q/ have been integrated into the Siwi phonological system, while the glottal stop /ʔ/ is absent, indicating an autonomous system. In the realm of morphology, Berber affixation structures remain dominant in verb conjugation, even though many root words are borrowed from Arabic.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, it was found that the use of Siwi is increasingly marginalized in formal domains such as education and social media, where the dominance of Egyptian Arabic exceeds 80%. Conversely, Siwi continues to persist in the contexts of traditional ceremonies and household interaction. The phenomenon of code-switching reveals that young speakers actively combine Arabic and Siwi structures in their daily communication, signaling the presence of adaptive bilingualism while also serving as a symbol of resistance to the dominance of the majority language.

These findings indicate that the vitality of Siwi depends largely on informal contexts and local cultural identity. Therefore, revitalization efforts must take into account the sociolinguistic realities and the digital strategies of the younger generation.

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