

When Bad Informants Happen to Good Linguists MMTH

Strolling through the suq one day in Tripoli in 1972, my wife and I passed a fabric store, little more than a hole in the wall. The shopkeeper popped out and held up a piece of rather ugly fabric for us to admire, saying that it was [tʰaftʰa] (with both *ts* pharyngealized). I smiled and produced an alveolar click to indicate my lack of desire to buy the stuff, and strolled on, wondering whether I should go back to find out how he had come by the term. The English word *taffeta*, you see, comes from the Persian *taafta*, the participle of *tab-* ‘weave’; how had Tripolitanian Arabic come by the word? From Persian or English? The shopkeeper wouldn’t know.

Later, I thought I had it. He had pharyngealized the *ts*, as Maghrebi Arabic speakers tend to do with loans from English and other European languages, as in [batʰatʰa] ‘potato’. So it must have come from English *taffeta*. I congratulated myself on my detective work.

Alas, I had jumped too quickly to my conclusion. A few months later, I happened to be at the airport, whence a flight was leaving for Iran (not with me on it, though). There above the check-in desk for all the world to see was the sign announcing the flight to [tʰahraan]. These blighters apparently pharyngealized even Persian dentals, despite the fact that in Persian the name of the city is spelled with the Arabic symbol for a plain [t]. Blast. Must one now resort to meaning to figure the thing out? It made more sense for the shopkeeper to be saying ‘taffeta’ than it would for him to be proudly announcing that the stuff was ‘woven’. So it probably came from English. Not so fast, though. *What if the Persians had already specialized the term to mean ‘taffeta’ by the time we borrowed it?* Quick, find a Persian speaker. Well, the only ones I’ve found so far have no idea what I’m talking about. Haim’s dictionary translates *taffeta* as [taafte], but adds the note that this means ‘thin silk-like cloth that should have a little stiffness’. If you look up [taafte] in the companion Persian-English volume, it says it means ‘twisted’; well, also ‘taffeta’.

James Darmesteter once referred to the Pashto habit of retroflexing dentals with no particular reason (no conditioning nearby *r* or anything) as ‘cerebralisation abusive’. It seems that the Maghrebi Arabic speakers are going in for a bit of abusive pharyngealization (cf. Deep Throat), to the point that we’ll never figure out where they borrow their words.