In this monograph, Roberta Morano re-examines Carl Reinhardt’s ‘Ein arabischer Dialekt gesprochen in ‘Oman und Zanzibar’ (1894), a key work in Omani Arabic dialectology until the 1980s, when new linguistic studies on the Arabic varieties spoken in Oman began to appear. The book provides a linguistic analysis of the Omani vernacular spoken in the al-ʿAwābī district (northern Oman), based on the comparison of naive inhabitants’ speech with data collected by the author. This comparison reveals a wide diachronic linguistic variation in the region, and the threat that such variation poses to linguistic features specific to the vernacular.

Organised in four chapters, the book introduces a sociolinguistic analysis of the Omani language, followed by an in-depth analysis of the al-ʿAwābī vernacular. The appendix includes two sample texts, fourteen proverbs and one traditional song. This study will be of interest to those working in the fields of Omani Arabic, historical and comparative linguistics, translation and interpretation, or those with an interest in how languages develop over time.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found here: www.openbookpublishers.com.
This study had two main aims: providing a linguistic analysis of the Omani vernacular spoken in the al-ʿAwābī district (northern Oman) and assessing the diachronic variation this vernacular underwent by comparing the new data collected with the set provided by Carl Reinhardt in 1894. These aims sought to answer a few urgent questions such as: is Reinhardt’s *Ein arabischer Dialekt gesprochen in ‘Oman und Zanzibar* (1894) still a reliable account of the vernacular spoken in the same area in the present day by speakers originating from the same tribes? How much of his material is still valid? And finally, to what extent has the influence of more prestigious forms of Arabic or MSA used in broadcasting and education impacted the vernacular spoken nowadays?

To answer these questions, this work consists of four chapters and an Appendix, providing an account of the dialect spoken by the consultants in the al-ʿAwābī district.

The issue of the reliability of Reinhardt’s (1894) work was addressed in different parts of this study: first, the examination of its strengths and weaknesses in ch. 1, §6.0, which provided the impetus for this research.

Second, in ch. 2 on Phonology, we saw how syncope is a much more widespread phenomenon in Reinhardt’s account of this dialect than in the primary data, where syncope mainly depends on vowel quality (see ch. 2, §2.0). Monophthongisation seems to occur more frequently in the primary data than in Reinhardt’s, who examines it only with regard to some specific
monosyllabic nouns (see ch. 2, §2.2). Admittedly, though, it is difficult to tell whether having access to more informants would have allowed the German scholar to sketch a different picture.

Third, in the section on nominal morphology, we saw how Reinhardt’s set of data differs from the primary ones only in the field of numerals and pronouns. Particularly interesting in the light of diachronic variation is the neutralisation of the gender distinction in demonstrative pronouns which seems to be taking place in the district (or at least in my informants’ speech). This neutralisation might easily be the result of the process of homogenisation, which is affecting the dialects of the Arabian Peninsula, since we have already seen it happening in other parts of the region.

In the section on verbal morphology, we found even more frequent differences: the realisation of the conjugation of the strong verb (see, for example, Table 3.37) and the formation of the future tense appear quite different (see for example the use of the bi-prefix in the primary data and the ha-prefix in Reinhardt’s).

The chapter on syntax constitutes the real novelty of this study: the description of the syntax in Reinhardt (1894) is restricted to the analysis of very few sentence types, albeit providing numerous examples.

The discussion on the active participle is particularly interesting from a dialectological point of view. If, on the one hand, the morphological pattern of the AP remained unchanged, its syntax, conversely, seems to have a wider spectrum of functions when compared to Reinhardt. Indeed, the German
author lacks an extensive analysis of the AP and the present study adds new elements to the literary debate, also demonstrating how the AP is a very productive feature in the informants’ speech.

The major differences relative to Reinhardt’s account of syntax can be seen in the use of the genitive markers and in the negation system. For example, we have demonstrated that ḥāl does not convey a genitive relation, but rather behaves as a preposition and that the clitic -šī, reported by Reinhardt as the main form of negation in the area, is found in the primary data only in a traditional song by one OS (i.e., S13), completely replaced by the mainstream mā in all the others.

We have also seen in the primary data some degree of retention of the VSO word order, and restricted use of the apophonic passive for specific I form verbs, e.g., wilidt ‘I was born’. Interestingly, this vernacular seems to retain the characteristic feminine plural forms in nouns, adjectives, verbs, and pronouns. However, strong variation can be seen in the realisation of the demonstrative pronouns, where the gender differentiation for the distal and proximal plural forms is fading.

This is an example of the diachronic variation that this study seeks to document in the al-‘Awābī district. Numerous instances show that some syntactic features are slowly becoming obsolete, being replaced by Gulf or MSA alternatives. Examples include the abundant use of the relative pronoun illus over bū and the widespread use of the negative marker mā in all sentence types. The latter phenomenon is especially noteworthy if we
think about the negative system described by Reinhardt, which now appears highly obsolescent in YS and AS groups.

With regards to the criteria chosen for the recruitment of informants—i.e., age, provenance, and level of education—we have witnessed a remarkable homogeneity between al-ʿAwābī and Wādī Banī Kharūṣ, with the major differences found in the occurrence of imāla and use of archaisms in the lexicon—e.g., the cardinal points.

Level of education also seems to go hand in hand with age, since access to education was guaranteed to the Omani population only from the 1980s onwards. One big difference in terms of literacy of speakers is the use of the particle inn- to introduce complement clauses: according to the primary data, it is found in the speech of literate YS in the district, and never in the speech of the illiterate OS.

Oman’s exit from isolationism certainly brought some extent of language variation—as also noticed by Leila Kaplan (2008) in regard to her informants in Bahla. This variation is especially visible if we consider the criterion of age. OS show a greater conformity to Reinhardt’s material, compared to the other two groups: in terms of phonology, for example, the speech of OS shows no occurrence of imāla and a lower occurrence of monophthongisation. In terms of morphology, we have found frequent use of comparative forms of adverbs, e.g., efwaq < fōq ‘up, above’, in OS and sporadic use in that of YS and AS. Moreover, we saw how OS seem more inclined to use an impersonal form of the active verb to express passivity—although the primary data are not sufficient to postulate this for certain. By
Conclusion

Contrast, we have acknowledged that in the domain of syntax, bū—the relative pronoun also reported by Reinhardt (1894)—occurs more often in the speech of YS than in that of the OS, who tend to use the more mainstream illi. We have found traces of the use of the clitic -ši and its emphatic counterpart šīši in the speech of two old men in the district (i.e., S8 and S13) and in one old woman (i.e., S15).

Although gender was not one of the criteria used for recruiting participants, the primary data showed an interesting differentiation in this sense, that is the AP forms bāği (only used by male speakers) and bāya (only used by female speakers).

One more conclusion we can draw from the argument explained in this study is the degree of influence of forms from neighboring dialects, the media and MSA. Evidence of a certain extent of influence can be found in the use of the relative pronoun illi—also found in Gulf, Ṣan‘ānī, and Najdi Arabic—over bū; in the use of bi- as a prefix for future tense, whereas Reinhardt (1894) reported ḥa-; in the use of mā as negative marker for all sentence-types, except coordinated negative clauses and imperative mood, where lā is used instead. The latter is clear evidence of MSA influence—brought by education and broadcasting—since in the district we have found indications of other, older, forms of negation, which are also partly attested in neighbouring dialects. Finally, the use of the particle inn- in complement clauses—found predominantly in the speech of literate speakers—is another piece of evidence of MSA influence over this dialect.
Less influence from other Omani and neighbouring varieties seems to happen at a phonological level: we have seen how both Muscat and Dhofari Arabic show iambic stress, whereas the informants’ speech in the al-‘Awābī district maintain a trochaic stress.

The points made so far also support Holes’ (2011b) thesis of a process of homogenisation which is happening in the Arabian Peninsula. The speed of diachronic change in this district of northern Oman—and in the region as a whole—is highly concerning and is demonstrated by the disappearance of certain lexical items and syntactic structures, which are progressively falling into oblivion through the generations. We have demonstrated how peculiar and rich the dialects of Oman can be: for example, the syntax of this vernacular showed a great number of archaisms, which at times relates this dialect to North Africa, e.g., the use of the auxiliary verb dār/yidīr ‘to start’ or the /-š/ negation.

These unique features, together with the knowledge of plant names, traditional medicine, natural environment, and arrays of orientation so treasured by local people, need to be protected and cherished both by urgently documenting the Arabic varieties spoken in Oman and the Peninsula and by creating awareness among the younger generation of traditional languages and cultural practices. It is hoped that this study might be a first step in this direction.