

Archeology of Language: Sicilian 'Beddu' and Arabic 'Badu'

Tom Verso (August 30, 2010)



'Forgetabout' Verdi in Milan's La Scala; more appropriate for southern-Italian Americans would be Michela Musolino's "L'Evento in Memoria di Pino Veneziano" in Selinunte, Sicily. Southern-Italian Americans confuse the current northern-Italian culture meme (cultivated in public schools, Italian language courses and tourist industry) with their own southern-ancestral history and culture.



Preface

Archeologists reconstruct the characteristics of past societies based on such things as 'pot-shards' and other material remnants of those societies. Similarly, contemporary languages contain linguistic remnants (words, phrases, sounds, etc.) used in the languages of past societies. These 'linguist-shards' so to speak provide information about the past societies from which they're derive.

The purpose of this essay is to consider the Sicilian word 'beddu-a' as such a 'linguist-shard' providing evidence of:

- 1) Sicily's past Arab culture
- 2) The different historic forces affecting the respective cultures of the Italian south and northern-Italy.

"You say 'bella' and I say 'bedda' - Let's call the whole thing off" (George and Ira Gershwin 1937 - modified)

On March 10, 1993, I posted the following query on H-Italy.org:

"I find the word beddu-a (pretty) listed in Privitera's Beginner's Sicilian language book; but I do not find it in Tuscan dialect (aka Italian) books and dictionaries...Is beddu-a etymologically derived from the Arabic word 'badu' which means 'people of the desert' (Anglicized form: bedouin)?"

Subsequently, some very interesting responses were posted to the H-Italy site and in a recent e-mail note. These responses may be categorized as follows:

I. Spelling variation

Ben Lawton and John M. Cammett think beddu is simply a spelling variation of bello.

1) "Beddu" is simply the Sicilian word for "bello." Under certain conditions "ll" in Sicilian becomes "dd" as in "cutieddu," or coltello." (Lawton 3/10/93)

2) "I believe that "beddu" is the Sicilian equivalent of "bello". The pronunciation of the Sicilian "d" or "dd" has no equivalent in Italian. (Cammett 3/11/93)

II. Connotative difference

1) Vincent Peloso thought there was a more significant difference between the two words than simply spelling. He noted the connotative difference of **endearment** - between 'beddu' and 'bello'. He wrote:

"...as a childhood Sicilian speaker, one in who's home Sicilian was the first language....as I understood it, and subsequently was told by English-speaking relatives, the word was an **endearment** in Sicilian dialect, as in: beddu miu (my dear, my beloved). I recall find it in a Sicilian-Italian dictionary located in the Library of Congress but I do not have the citation at hand. I could not say what its derivation is. (Peloso 3/10/93)

2) Subsequently, I concurred with Peloso's **connotative difference** of **endearment**, writing:

"The bedda = bella notion, implied by Lawton and Cammett, seems to be based on the lexicon or denotative meanings of the words. In that sense, they are equivalent (beautiful/pretty = beautiful/pretty)."

However, Mr. Peloso brought out the **connotative meaning** of **endearment**. Based on my experience living in a Sicily-American urban village, I perfectly agree with him. It seems to me, bella is an aesthetics word denoting an abstract sense of beauty as in the cathedral is beautiful (bella). Bedda is not abstract. It connotes a very strongly felt emotion.

When a grandmother greets her granddaughter with bedda, she is not communicating anything remotely like the man who says the woman is bella. Also, can the Sicilian peasant women's laminating wail **Bedda Matri** be changed to **Bella Matri** without a significant change in meaning?

Not in my neighborhood! (Verso 3/12/93)

3) Recently (amazingly, over seven years later), I received an e-mail from 'Pat' who also provided examples of bedda's **connotative meaning** of **endearment**. He wrote:

"..in the messinese of my grandmother beddu is for people and bellu is for things as in "A casa e' bella" but "A matri e bedda".

III. Similarities between the Sicilian language and Arabic

John Harding provided a cogent example of the general similarities between Sicilian and Arabic suggesting that bedda has Arabic roots and not just a variation in the spelling of bella. He wrote (note especially 'bedduzza'):

"My ex-wife speaks Sicilian fluently. We lived for a while in Saudi Arabia, where I taught at King Fahd University. The first time we were visited by one of the university's gardeners, I found to my dismay that he spoke only Arabic. I couldn't understand a word he said. My Sicilian-speaking wife, standing with me said, all of a sudden, "I can understand this guy!" With her Sicilian, she was also able to understand an elderly Saudi lady who paid us visits -- again the Saudi lady spoke only Arabic. Common words like faloos (money), ginna (heaven), tavola (table) were the same in both languages. The Sicilian town of Marsala, famous for its wine, is the Port of Ali (mars ali). **Bedduzza mia (my beauty) could understand Arabic**. By the way the "dd" is pronounced as a VERY hard "d," in Sicilian and not as a "th." (Harding 3/11/03)

The 'archeology' of the Sicilian language

1) Historic Roots of Sicilian 'dd'

To my mind, the **spelling explanations** for the difference between 'bedda' and

'bella', limited to the 'denotative' definition and ignoring the 'connotative' meaning, are incomplete explanations. The complete meaning and understanding of any word in any language entails both the denotation and connotation.

Moreover, the 'spelling explanations' do not lend themselves to finding the '**cause**' of the differences between the Sicilian language and Tuscan/Italian. Whereas the **connotative mean** of 'bedda' discussed above points to a suggestion about the origin of the word and implies more generally the vast differences between the histories and cultures of northern-Italy and the South.

Language is a social variable. It changes (varies) over time and those changes (variations) are **caused** by, or **correlated** with, other social variables (e.g. migration, etc.). The social scientific historical question is:

Why is there a difference between the Sicilian language and northern dialects exemplified by bella and badda; i.e. what is the **cause** of the differences between them.

In the above mentioned e-mail, 'Pat' also brought out a very interesting **historic aspect** of the 'dd' 'll' difference. He writes:

"The double D sound in various pronunciations, is found not only in Sicily but in the regions of Calabria, Puglia, Basilicata, Sardegna as well as the southern part of the province of Salerno and in pockets in the province of Avellino in the region of Campania."

"The transition "from the LL to the DD: occurred at least 1,000 years ago as Vulgar, or Late Latin transformed into the Romance languages and all their 'dialects'."

Note: Pat does not list northern Italian idioms as having experienced the same 'DD' evolution - especially Tuscan/Italian. Also, John Cammett says: "The pronunciation of the Sicilian "d" or "**dd**" **has no equivalent in Italian.**"

In short, the Latin word 'bellus' evolved into the northern Italian 'bella' and the Sicilian 'bedda'.

Pat's reference to the Vulgar transition period "as least 1,000 years ago" (i.e. late first- early second millennium) puts the southern 'DD' sound in an historic context where we can look for 'causes' or 'correlates' of the transition.

Seemingly, social events occurred in the South during this period that affected the evolution of its language that did not occur in the North. What might they be?

The late first and early second millennium period marks the height of Arab presents in southern Italy

and Sicily. The linguistic transition from the Vulgar to the southern languages occurred during the same time frame as the pervasive Arab presence and influence in southern Italy and Sicily. At the time, Arab presence in the South took many different forms: colonization (e.g. Sicily), extensive trade, mercenaries for southern Italian nobles, and seaborne military raids from Rome to Apulia.

In her absolutely masterful source document history, "Before the Normans: Southern Italy in the Ninth & Tenth Centuries", Barbara M. Kreutz writes:

"During the first half of the ninth century, southern Italy...began to slide within the orbit of Islam...**The real role of the Arabs in southern Italian history has had little attention...**the Arab impact on southern Italy was complex." (emp.+)

2) **beddu & badu**

It is my understanding that the Arabic word 'badu' has a similar connotative meaning as the Sicilian word 'beddu'. That is to say: it connotes a sense of endearment. Arabic 'badu' denotes people of the desert. However, desert in this case is not simply a geographic location or phenomenon. There is a spiritual (almost mystic) connotation to the desert. If this is the case, when an Arab refers to the people of the desert (badu), it has a connotative meaning much different than an American referring to the people who live in the Southwest (e.g. Arizona). The desert is not just a place where the badu live. To the badu the desert is an **endearing** place.

Consider, for example the 6th Century poem "A Desert Encampment" which juxtaposes the "unhallowed" characteristic of the desert such as "great deluges" with the "**sacrosant**" characteristics of the "star-bourne showers of Spring" that bring forth "aihakan", "ostriches" and "antelopes". (see: "[Bedounin - A Desert Encampment](#)" [2]) . Also, think of Libya's current head of state Muammar Gaddafi who lives in a tent and takes it with him on international state visits.

My **theory** is that an **endearing** concept of the desert connoted in the Arabic word badu was introduced into the Sicilian language as beddu circa 1,000 AD. This is to say; the Sicilian word 'beddu' is a 'linguist-shard' from the period when Arab culture was having a major impact on the people and culture of southern Italy and Sicily.

Conclusion

More importantly, the difference between bedda and bella is indicative of a much more general differentiation of the histories and cultures of northern and southern Italy. Unlike the North, the South especially Sicily as noted by Prof. Kreutz came under intense Arab influence between the first and second millennium; an influence that is manifested today in the language, food, architecture, music, facial features, etc. of Sicily. Consider for example the music and countenance of Michela Musolino, both Arabic through and through.

Americans of southern Italian and Sicilian descent, it seems to me, are largely uninformed about their ancient past and how that past is still present in their culture. They are becoming confused about what it means to be an American of southern-Italian descent. Increasingly, under the influence of mass media, public school education, college Italian language course, the Italian tourist industry, etc., they are coming to identify with the history and culture of the northern Renaissance.

To my mind this is not simply poor education. It is a tragedy because the history of southern Italy and Sicily incorporates the history of the whole Mediterranean ancient world: Egyptian, Mycenaean, Phoenician, Classical Greek, Romans, Orthodox Greek, Arabs, etc. Whereas northern Italian history only goes back as far as the nomadic invaders (aka barbarians) from the Eurasian Steppes who overran the vestiges of the collapsing Western Roman Empire in northern-Italy.



However, there are signs that “the South will rise again”; for example, the music of Michela Musolino.

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