

Dialect contact and change in an Arabic morpheme: Examining Jordanian and Palestinian dialects

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In Arabic dialects, there is a vocalic suffix that denotes feminine grammatical gender in many nouns and most adjectives. Depending on the dialect—and in many dialects, on the phonological environment as well—this suffix is either a low vowel of the type *-a* or a front-high/mid vowel of the type *-e* (including such variants as *-ɪ* and *-ε*). This paper focuses on variation in the phonology of this morpheme in Arabic dialects of the Levant, with most of the data representing dialects of Jordan and Palestine.

Our data are derived from sociolinguistic interviews held in Amman, Sult and Ajlun in Jordan and Gaza, Jaffa, Nazareth, Umm al-Fahm, Kufur Yasif, Jerusalem and Ramallah in Palestine.

Generally speaking, in urban Palestinian dialects, the *-e* type suffix is the default, with lowering to *-a* occurring in certain phonological environments. Gaza is unique in its divergence from the general urban Palestinian pattern, in that, traditionally, there is only one variant, the open *-a*, akin to the situation in Cairo. However, as a result of dialect contact since the late 1940s, some speakers have a limited percentage of *-e* type variants as well.

Unlike the Palestinian case, in traditional Jordanian varieties *-a* type variants are the default, and *-e* type variants are phonologically marked. In this respect, these dialects are in line with those of the Horan region (spanning from the central Jordan to and including the south of Syria). However, in the dialect of Amman, the phonology of this suffix has undergone a structural change, essentially abandoning this pattern.

Phonetic differences are also attested. In northern Palestine (e.g., Nazareth), the *-e* type variants can be as high as *-ɪ*, similar to its realization in the dialects of neighboring Lebanon. In Amman, the capital of Jordan, where a new dialect has been forming over the last three generations, our data show that among the first generation of Palestinian migrants into the city, the high variant *-ɪ* is still intact. In contrast, the second and third generations of Palestinians living in Amman typically have the lower *-e/ε* variants. In fact, younger speakers often mimic and mock older speakers by using higher realizations of these vowels in an unnatural manner.

The case of Palestinians in Jordan (and in Amman in particular) illustrates how divergence in each of the traditional dialects—Palestinian and Jordanian—results in the two dialects meeting halfway, so to speak, resulting in a ‘fudged form,’ to borrow a term from Peter Trudgill’s work. This leads us to a discussion of ‘the bigger picture’ in Arabic dialects. Eastern dialects of Arabic, notably in Iraq, are known as ‘raising’ dialects, i.e., the feminine ending in these varieties is categorically a higher, *-e* type vowel. In Saudi Arabia, some varieties which had traditionally been ‘raising’ are gradually reversing to a mixed system. The case of al-’Aḥsā’ in Eastern Arabia, currently studied by Moayyad Al Bohnayyah, is currently at a stage that very much resembles that of the Jordanian varieties.

As the factors that are involved in these changes are both phonological—and rather complex ones at that—and social (including ethnicity, age, migration status), we believe that only a combination of a historical analysis—via an apparent time lens—and a sociolinguistic approach, can provide a full account thereof.