

Investigating Age as a Social Variable Among Muslim Alawites in Tartus Syria: The Qaf as an Example

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1 Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project that investigates language variation and change in the city of Tartus, Syria, where more variables are examined. The current study investigates the variable use of the Qaf variable, which is realized as either [q] and [ʔ] in the colloquial speech of Muslim Alawites in the urban and rural regions. A quantitative analysis was carried out on the data that emerged from interactions with 94 randomly selected participants. The frequency of the [q] and [ʔ] variants was recorded, and inferential statistics using the Binary Logistic Regression test was employed to examine any possible influence of the social factor of age on the realization of [q] and [ʔ]. This study adopts the statistical method commonly used by first-wave variationist sociolinguists. Data analysis revealed various [q] and [ʔ] usage patterns regarding the social categories examined. Age was statistically insignificant in the rural regions. However, the younger age groups (i.e., 19 and below, Between 20-29, and Between 30-39) were largely [ʔ] speakers in the urban region. The elder age groups (i.e., Between 40-49 and 50 and above) showed a tendency toward the [q] variant.

Keywords: variation, change, Alawites, age, Syria.

2 Introduction

2.1 The Linguistic Variable

The (q) variable has been regarded as “the most salient phonological feature by which speakers of any of the colloquial Arabic varieties can be identified” (Al-Khatib, 1988, p. 80). The status of the variable and its clear social embeddedness have attracted attention and made it “the best studied sociolinguistic variable in Arabic” (Al-Wer & Herin, 2011, p. 59). This interest resulted in dozens of studies dealing with the social life of this variable in the Arabic World in general (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Al-Khatib, 1988; Al-Wer & Herin, 2011; Suleiman, 2004) and the Syrian context in specific (Daher, 1998; Habib, 2005, 2010, 2011, 2016).

The principal reflexes of this variable include the voiceless uvular plosive [q], the voiceless glottal stop [ʔ], the voiced velar plosive [g], and the voiceless plosive [k] (Table 2.1). While the [q] is the main reflex used in Standard Arabic, it is also present in other colloquial dialects across the Arabic context. The rest of the reflexes are colloquial (Suleiman, 2004, p. 98). The [q] and [ʔ] can be referred to as [qaf] and [ʔaf], respectively.

Table 2.1 *Main Reflexes of the (q) Variable*

Modern Standard Arabic	Dialectal Arabic		
[q]	[q]	[ʔ]	[g]
[q]ələm “pen”	[q]ələm	[ʔ]ələm	[g]ələm
bæ:[q]i “remaining”	bæ:[q]i	bæ:[ʔ]i	bæ:[g]i
wərə[q] “papers”	wərə[q]	wərə[ʔ]	wərə[g]

2.2 Data Collection

The current research draws on general insights from previous research in the Arabic context and in particular (Abdel-Jawad, 1981, 1987; Al-Khatib, 1988; Al-Wer & Herin, 2011; Daher, 1998; Habib, 2005, 2010, 2016; Hachimi, 2007). This study incorporates instruments and procedures associated with quantitative research, including the statistical analysis involved in analyzing the data that emerged through interactions.

Data for this research was collected during the fieldwork period at Tartus city that lasted from July 2019 until September of the same year. The settings of such interaction varied between urban and rural regions. The settings’ selection was largely based on participants’ preferences and availability, which included participants’ homes, offices, shops, coffee shops, clubs, etc. These interactions often happened in the presence of one or more people who are friends or friends of friends who also agreed to take part in this research. Following this approach largely reduced the effects of the “observer’s paradox” (Labov, 1966, p. 43).

Informing participants in advance and availing their consent to participate in this research has been seen as essential to a successful experience in data collection (Trudgill, 1974, p. 26). Accordingly, all participants were informed in advance that such interactions would be recorded for research purposes, and the recorder was always placed in the open and in front of the participants, but usually on the side and not in the area between them and me to avoid any possible distractions that can be caused from seeing it. This largely reduced any potential disturbance and did not affect the recording quality. The recordings for this research were made using a Zoom H1N recorder, and no major technical issues related to voice quality were encountered.

These interactions were largely unstructured. The participants' demographic details were sought either at the beginning or end of the recordings. In the majority of the cases, a general overview of the research without any reference to the variable in question was made. It was clear that people showed a high tendency to discuss and comment on accents, dialects, and features of dialects in their group interactions. It was enough, in many cases, to bring one aspect of a dialectal variation to trigger and transform the whole discussion in this direction. In many instances, the (q) variable and distinctions or commentaries emerged without bringing them up. While my focus was largely on recording speakers in a natural setting and gleaning the variants in question from such interactions, I was also interested in any commentary regarding the usage and evaluation of such variants and their speakers. Thus, unless the (q) is brought in, I would usually bring it into the discussion at various stages of the interactions.

The length of such interactions varied from one session to another due to many reasons. At office timings, for example, a few participants had limited timing. In other contexts, gatherings were long enough and allowed for extra time with various participants present. In a number of cases, the researcher was left alone with the participants after others made sure that the flow of the interaction was smooth. In a few cases, especially with younger kids, the researcher had to look for various ways to extend the interactions by asking various questions, including picture naming, and asking participants to tell jokes, stories, or speak about their favorite cartoons. This inconsistency is not uncommon in situations where naturally occurring speech is sought (Kiesling, 2011, p. 37). The varying length of interactions and/or the duration that some speakers during interactions were largely overcome by including the speech of no more than 5 minutes and no less than 1 minute in the interactions. Moreover, the analysis was based on the (q) occurrence percentage and not on their count (See Appendix & Table 2.1).

Participants in this study were divided into five age groups: age group as Table 2.2 shows:

Age group	Age
Age group (1)	19 and below
Age group (2)	Between 20-29
Age group (3)	Between 30-39
Age group (4)	Between 40-49
Age group (5)	50 and above

2.3 Data Analysis

For the analysis, I listened to all the interactions and extracted the lexical occurrences of [q] and [ʔ] for each speaker. I further calculated the raw frequencies and turned them into a percentage using the statistical formula that is commonly used in variationist sociolinguistics studies (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Al-Shatarat, 2015; Jassem, 1987; Labov, 1972; Trudgill, 1974):

Percentage score = (the number of occurrences of a variant) divided by (the total number of occurrences of a variable), which are multiplied by 100.

A Binomial Logistic Regression Test has been conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 26.0) to investigate the possible role of the extralinguistic variables under investigation. The Binomial Logistic Regression Test is a powerful tool for analyzing variation where the variable takes two binary values (Speelman, 2014, p. 487; Tagliamonte, 2016, pp. 113-114).

3 Statistical Analysis

Using the Binary Logistic Regression test, this section examines the hypotheses related to the possible correlation between the age factor and the (q)'s variants among Muslim Alawites in the urban and rural regions.

Section 3.1 examines the hypotheses related to Muslim Alawites in the urban region. Section 3.2 examines the hypotheses related to Muslim Alawites in the rural region.

3.1 Muslim Alawites (Urban Region)

This section tests the hypotheses related to the possible correlation between the social variables age and the (q)'s variants. The hypotheses are as follows:

Null hypotheses: There is no statistically significant correlation between the factor age and the realization of (q).

Alternative hypotheses: There is a statically significant correlation between the factor age and the realization of (q).

To test the hypotheses related to age, we use the Binary Logistic Regression test.

Table 3.1 *Variables in the Equation*

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig	Exp(B)
Age(1)			12.223	4	.016	
Age(2)	-2.637	1.019	6.697	1	.010	.072
Age(3)	-2.461	.937	6.899	1	.009	.085
Age(4)	-.989	.961	1.059	1	.303	.372
Age(5)	-.242	1.415	.029	1	.864	.785

Table 3.1 shows that there is a statistically significant effect in some *age* categories where the *sig.* value is less the 0.05 for the first three categories age(1), age(2), and age(3) (i.e., 19 and below, Between 20-29, and Between 30-39, respectively). However, the categories age(4) and age(5) (i.e., Between 40-49 and 50 and above, respectively) are statistically insignificant.

Therefore, we accept the alternative hypothesis that says “there is a statistically significant effect of the factor age on the realization of (q).” This applies to the first three age groups and excludes the last two.

3.2 Muslim Alawites (Rural Region)

This section tests the hypothesis related to the possible correlation between the social variables age and the (q)’s variants. The hypotheses are as follows:

Null hypotheses: There is no statistically significant correlation between the factor age and the realization of (q).

Alternative hypotheses: There is a statically significant correlation between the factor age and the realization of (q).

To test the hypotheses related to age, we use the Binary Logistic Regression test.

Table 3.2 *Variables in the Equation*

	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig	Exp(B)
Age(1)			.000	4	1.000	
Age(2)	-.511	27323.549	.000	1	1.000	.600
Age(3)	-21.089	15087.088	.000	1	.999	.000
Age(4)	-.020	22159.143	.000	1	1.000	.980
Age(5)	.114	42931.282	.000	1	1.000	1.121

Table 3.2 shows that the factor age is statistically insignificant as the *sig.* value for all the groups is higher than 0.05. This makes us accept the null hypothesis that says “there is no statistically significant effect of the factor age on the realization of (q).”

4 Discussion and Conclusion

Age has been a primary social variable in the majority of statistical investigations into variation and change in the non-Arabic context (e.g., Miller, 2005; Sankoff & Blondeau, 2007; Walters, 1991). Various studies revealed higher tendencies among younger generations toward adopting the emerging new forms (e.g., Eckert, 1988; J. Milroy & Milroy, 1985). Most of the studies that employed the statistical approach in the Arabic context have followed such a tradition. In Tunisia, for example, Walters (1991, p. 214) reported inter-generational differences between speakers interviewed in Korba, which he regards as being “indicative of a linguistic change taking place in the community.” In Cairo, Miller (2005) reported “long-term accommodation” among the first generation and “total accommodation or dialect shift” with the second generation (Miller, 2005, p. 294). Similar results of change being led by younger generations have been reported in other countries in the Arabic World, such as Al-Khatib (1988) and Al-Wer & Herin (2011) in Jordan, as well as Cotter (2016) in Palestine.

In the Syrian context, Habib (2005) reports higher tendencies toward the [ʔ] variant among the younger age groups compared to a higher tendency toward the [q] and its maintenance among the elder age groups. Habib's (2010) study reveals similar patterns regarding the [q] and [ʔ] variants among two generations (18-35 & 52+) of the rural migrants in the city of Homs. Habib reports a “quick” pace of linguistic shift towards the “urban” and “prestigious” [ʔ] that the younger age group leads. She attributes this to the contact that happened at school with urban [ʔ] speakers, which made them realize at an earlier stage the stigma associated with the [q] variant and led to their selection of the “prestigious” and “urban” variant over the [q] variant that was the primary input from their parents. She contends that “[t]he urban identity became their identity, leading to their selection of [ʔ] over [q]” (Habib, 2010, p. 84).

In our context, examining the data related to Muslim Alawites showed *age* as statistically significant in the urban regions but insignificant in the rural ones. In the urban areas, the three age groups that showed the highest tendencies toward the [ʔ] variant are the youngest age groups (19 and below), (Between 20-29), and (Between 30-39), which can be roughly regarded as those who are mainly born in the city, and those who migrated to the city at an early age and who seem to level their speech towards the urban features including [ʔ]. The rest of the groups, namely (Between 40-49) and (50 and above), showed a higher tendency towards [q], indicating a higher level of preservation of the linguistic features of their origin and upbringing.

Similar to Habib (2010), we argue that the younger generation shows more tendency toward being part of the urban identity in general terms. However, this change is relatively slower than that of Homs. The continuous influence of in-migration from rural to urban regions in our context and the role of circulation which involves “a great variety of movement usually short-term repetitive or cyclical in character, but all having in common the lack of any declared intention of permanent or long-lasting change of residence” (Zelinsky, 1971, p. 226 cited in Kerswill, 2006, p. 2275). This circulation can affect the speech habits of such young students (i.e., Between 20-29), especially females who become in direct contact with speakers of urban dialects. Such circulation is high in action in Tartus city due to the relative proximity of rural and urban regions and the presence of a considerable number of workers, employees, and students who commute daily for their jobs and classes.

University students, workers, and employees can act as “language missionaries” (Trudgill, 1986) and “potential bridgeheads for the introduction of innovations or for dialect leveling” (Kerswill, 2006, p. 2275). This “circulation” can also act as a bridgehead for the increased maintenance of the “rural forms” among urban speakers of rural origins. Moreover, repeated visits to the migrants’ rural villages have been stronger and more consistent. These factors are essential for the maintenance of [q] and the slower pace of change towards the [ʔ] in our context. The change is slower in pace and is likely to speed up from third-generation onwards.

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Investigating Age as Social Variable Among Muslim Alawites in Tartus Syria:

The Qaf as an Example

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Appendix *Sample of the Distribution of Speakers Across Social and Linguistic Categories*

Speaker	Age	Religion/Sect	Region	No. of [q]	% of [q]	No. of [ʔ]	% of [ʔ]	Total No. of [q] and [ʔ]	[q] or [ʔ]
10	30	MA ^a	U ^b	13	100	0	0	13	q
21	55	MA	R ^c	13	100	0	0	13	q
92	28	MA	U	6	24	19	76	25	ʔ

^a MA = Muslim Alawite. ^b U = Urban. ^c R = Rural.
