

Editorial

Introducing the Special Issue: Language Use in the Middle East and North Africa

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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region represents a rich tapestry of languages, cultures, and political, religious, and societal dynamics. In this intricate mosaic, language not only serves as a means of communication but also as a reflection of societal structures, identities, and historical contexts (Suleiman 1999). Motivated by understanding the dynamics of language use and interaction within this diverse social and linguistic fabric of the MENA region, this issue delves into various facets of language use within this region. While exploring different varieties of Arabic has been foundational in Arabic sociolinguistics (e.g., Bassiouney 2009), equal emphasis should be given to language contact phenomena between Arabic and other regional languages (e.g., Abd-el-Jawad 2006), such as Hebrew, Berber, Kurdish, Turkish, and Persian, as well as global languages, such as English and French. Likewise, an equal opportunity should be given to investigating the influence of the media (e.g., Habib 2018), social media (e.g., Habib 2023), internet, texting, and international schools' education on the usage patterns of Arabic in the wake of the pervasive dominance of English, and to some extent French, in these mediums. Beyond considering traditional linguistic and social factors, such as age, gender, social class, locality, ethnicity, education, social networks, and identity (Labov 2001), this issue sheds light on the multifaceted societal influences on language use, including religious, attitudinal, political, ideological, psychological/cognitive, and cultural aspects (Labov 2010). This interdisciplinary exploration situates the study of language and social interaction in the MENA region within the realms of sociolinguistics, language variation and change, language contact, linguistic anthropology, bi/multilingualism, discourse analysis, conversational analysis, second language acquisition, and pragmatics. Embracing a diversity of methodological perspectives, including qualitative and quantitative approaches, this issue aspires to provide a broad understanding of language dynamics within the complex socio-cultural landscape of the MENA region.

Comprising seven compelling articles, this Special Issue highlights the multifaceted ways in which language and society interact across the MENA region. By examining diverse linguistic phenomena, from phonological variation to pragmatic functions, each contribution offers valuable insights and brings us closer to understanding the complex dynamics of language use within MENA speakers, communities, and countries. Thus, this issue constitutes a great addition to the scarce books and monographs describing language use in its social context in the MENA region.

In their contribution, "The Effect of Gender, Urban/Rural Background, and Profession on Patterns of Use of Color Terms in Jordan", Alzoubi et al. examine the relationship between the use of a wide spectrum of color terms and a person's professional, geographical, and gender identity background. Using a color-naming task with three hundred and ninety-nine participants, they discovered that females (participants whose profession involves colors) and urban participants used more diverse color terms than males, participants with no color training, as well as rural participants.

Tamam Mohamad's work, "The Status of Religion/Sect-Based Linguistic Variation in Tartus, Syria: Looking at the Nuances of Qaf as an Example", investigates the historical and



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sociolinguistic dynamics influencing the religious linguistic distribution and associations of the (q) variable, which is realized in this region as the voiceless uvula stop [q] or the glottal stop [ʔ]. This variable is of a special interest in Arabic sociolinguistic studies (e.g., [Daher 1998](#); [Habib 2010](#)) because of its salient variability and association with different social meanings based on gender and social context (e.g., [Habib 2016](#)). In this study, however, religion is at the forefront. From the data gathered from 93 speakers, it was found that the variant [q] is predominantly used by Alawites. [ʔ] is mainly used by Sunnis and Christians, but it is gradually spreading to Alawites in urban centers. While this distribution of (q) is expected in Syria, what is interesting in the finding is the emergence of [q] as a religious, social, and symbolic marker of Alawite during the 2011 war, compared to the emergence of [ʔ] as a religious-neutral variant that was resorted to by speakers whose speech is characterized with the use of [q] to evade tension and social pressure.

Faraj and Hamid's contribution, "Differential Effects of Input Quantity and Input Quality on Bilingual Development: A Study with Kurdish–English Adolescents", explores the effect of language use among Kurdish minorities in Iraq on their bilingual development. This work particularly focuses on the effect of input quantity factors (such as school input) and input quality factors (such as home media input) on the development of the morphosyntax, vocabulary size, and lexical access ability in the Kurdish-L1 and English-L2 of Kurdish–English bilingual adolescents. They found that "higher parental Kurdish proficiency and more exposure to Kurdish input through siblings and reading activities were associated with better Kurdish morphosyntactic skill". However, Kurdish vocabulary size and lexical access ability were affected by the degree of exposure to Kurdish native-speakers. Similarly, higher exposure to English was associated with better English morphosyntactic skill and a larger vocabulary size. However, lexical access ability in English was associated with higher paternal English proficiency. More importantly, input quality emerged as more important than input quantity in "explaining Kurdish morphosyntactic and vocabulary size skills and lexical access ability in both Languages".

Shetewi's work, "Accommodation Patterns in the Speech of Arabic-Speaking Children and Adolescents: A Variationist Analysis", explores variation in speech accommodation based on the interviewer's/interlocutor's local or urban background. She investigates three phonological variables—(θ), (ð), and (q)—and one morphophonological variable—the feminine suffix (-a)—in the speech of 40 children and adolescents from a community of Palestinian refugees in a refugee camp 25 km to the southwest of Damascus, Syria, allowing for dialect contact with Damascene Arabic, the national standard. The dialect of the Khan Eshieh camp is characterized as a traditional Bedouin dialect. The author found that age, gender, and linguistic variables influenced patterns of accommodation. For example, more convergence to the urban interviewer was observed with the variable (q), and less convergence and more variation were observed with the variable (-a). Further, girls and speakers younger than 15 showed higher degrees of urban convergence. However, males aged 15–17 exhibited divergence from the urban forms and maintenance of their traditional Bedouin forms. These patterns of accommodation are linked to issues of identity construction and linguistic prestige in Arabic. The speakers' accommodative behavior reflects their awareness and competence in the social interpretations and values of the variables under investigation.

Almosa's article, "The Emergence of *Tab* in Najdi Arabic", combines a variationist approach with conversation analysis to investigate the social and functional uses of the variants of (TAYYIB) 'okay, well, right'—full form [t^ʰajjib] and reduced form [t^ʰab]—in the speech of 60 speakers from Riyadh, Saudi Arabic. She found that the choice of a variant is conditioned by their pragmatic functions. The full form is used to perform the following pragmatic functions: interpersonal, textual, and interpersonal–textual. However, the reduced form is only used in the latter two functions. It is also used more by females and younger speakers, which is interpreted as a change in progress led by younger females.

In their work, “Isma‘ili Continuity and Social Change: Chronotopes and Practicing Taqiyya within the Sulaymani Community of Saudi Arabia”, Aljuran and Brewster uniquely explore the discourses surrounding the religious and social practice of *taqiyya* ‘circumscription’, which was used as a self-preservation practice within the Sulaymani Isma‘ili community in Saudi Arabia due to centuries of anti-Shi’a discrimination. This practice included concealing one’s religious identity, avoiding display of certain rituals publicly, and sometimes impersonating a majority Sunni religious identity. The recent transformational changes that are taking place in Saudi society have created a rift in the use and interpretation of this practice. For some, *taqiyya* is an essential and timeless component of the Isma‘ili faith, knowledge, and ideology. For others, this practice lost its traditional meaning within the current societal reforms, and it is seen as outdated and unnecessary.

Shehata’s work, “Learners’ Perception of Arabic Consonant Contrasts: Gender and Learning Context Effects”, examines whether gender and learning context affect learners’ perception of the following Arabic contrastive consonants: /d/-/d^ɕ/, /h/-/ħ/, /s/-/s^ɕ/, and /t/-/t^ɕ/ . A perception task was used with a balanced sample of 60 intermediate Arabic learners (30 males and 30 females) from two learning contexts—a study abroad program in Egypt and a Western American university—before and after one semester of Arabic study. Gender did not emerge as statistically significant. Only the learning context emerged as statistically significant; the study abroad group outperformed their American university counterparts in /h/-/ħ/ and /d/-/d^ɕ/ contrasts. These findings highlight the importance of an authentic learning environment of Arabic for English learners.

Together, the collection of articles presented in this Special Issue brings attention to the intricate relationship between language and society in the MENA region. At the intersection of gender, urban/rural/Bedouin backgrounds, profession, accommodation, linguistic variation, religious practices, societal transformation, and factors affecting bilingual and perceptual development, each contribution adds valuable insights to our understanding of language dynamics within this diverse cultural landscape. Moreover, these studies shed light on the evolving nature of language within minority and majority groups in response to political, global (as represented by the dominance of English), and societal challenges. By embracing various sociolinguistic approaches and diverse methodological perspectives, this Special Issue offers a nuanced frame of reference on the complex linguistic situation and the entangled conditions that shape language use in the MENA region.

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