

Morphophonemic convergence and divergence in Palestinian Arabic

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This paper provides a sociophonetic account of variation in the Arabic feminine gender marker, a word final vocalic morpheme realized variably in Arabic varieties as [a, ε, e, i] (Al-Wer 2007). 1,132 occurrences of this morpheme were analyzed acoustically in Praat (Boersma & Weenink 2016) from a sample of 22 speakers, representing three age groups, two genders, and two sectors of the Palestinian community: indigenous Gaza City Palestinians and refugees from Jaffa who have lived in Gaza City since 1948. Occurrences of this vowel were normalized to control for physiological differences using the formula $(F2-F1)/F1$, providing a normalized (raising index) score for each occurrence that was treated as the dependent variable in the subsequent Linear Mixed Effects analysis.

Gaza City (Bergsträßer 1915; Salonen 1979, 1980) is reported to realize this vowel as [a], in contrast to other urban Levantine dialects (e.g. Jaffa) that raise this vowel to [e] except after back consonants (Al-Wer 2007). For instance:

	<i>Gaza City</i>	<i>Urban Levantine (e.g. Jaffa)</i>
‘pretty [f.sg.]’	[hilwa]	[hilwe]
‘freedom’	[hurrijja]	[hurrijje] – <i>but:</i>
‘good [f.sg.]’	[mni:ħa]	[mni:ħa]

The present study indicates that Gaza City residents and Jaffa refugees are undergoing similar processes of lowering and backing of this vowel across generations (Figures 1 & 2). Younger speakers in both communities have a lower and backer vowel for this variable (henceforth (ah)) (Tables 1 & 2, $p < 0.01$) than elderly speakers. This suggests that refugees are diverging from the raised [e] realization of their traditional dialect, while both communities are converging on a similar realization of this morpheme in the speech of the youngest generation.

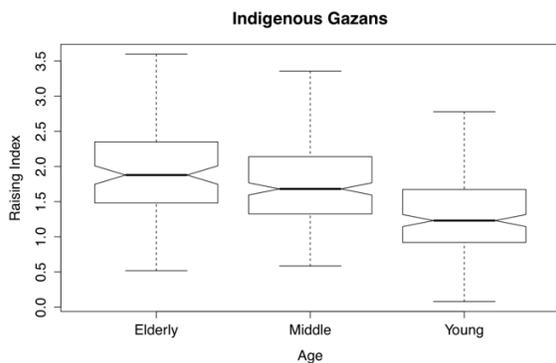


Figure 1.

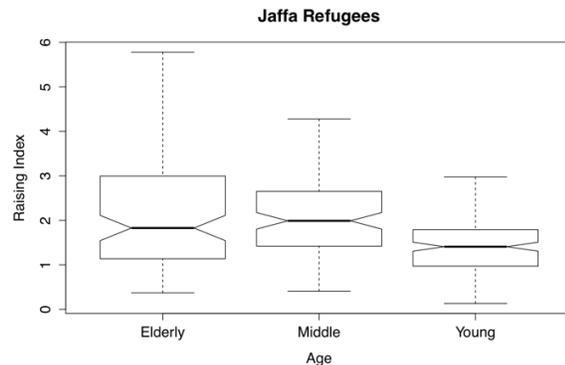


Figure 2.

Table 1: Summary of the realization of (ah) at the vowel midpoint, with reference levels Elderly and Gaza. Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05

(Intercept)	Jaffa (Background)	Middle (Age)	Young (Age)
Est.: 2.02167	Est.: 0.04749	Est.: - 0.11595	Est.: - 0.47264
Error: 0.14486	Error: 0.16024	Error: 0.16735	Error: 0.16209
t-value: 13.956	t-value: 0.296	t-value: - 0.693	t-value: - 2.916
Sig. ***	Sig.	Sig.	Sig. **

Table 2: Summary of the realization of (ah) at the vowel midpoint, with reference levels Elderly and Jaffa. Signif. codes: 0 ‘***’ 0.001 ‘**’ 0.01 ‘*’ 0.05

(Intercept)	Gaza (Background)	Middle (Age)	Young (Age)
Est.: 2.06916	Est.: -0.04749	Est.: - 0.11595	Est.: - 0.47264
Error: 0.16980	Error: 0.16024	Error: 0.16735	Error: 0.16209
t-value: 12.186	t-value: -0.296	t-value: - 0.693	t-value: - 2.916
Sig. ***	Sig.	Sig.	Sig. **

These changes come as a result of long-term dialect contact that has been taking place in Gaza City between different varieties of Arabic, while also indicating forms of leveling (Trudgill 1986, 2004). Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, refugee migration has created a situation in which today over 70% Gaza’s population is of a refugee background. These results highlight the ways in which this prolonged contact has affected different varieties of Palestinian Arabic spoken in Gaza, and provides one of only a limited number sociophonetic analyses of Arabic.

References

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