

## **Is the diglossic situation in Arabic making its way into texting? A sociolinguistic study of phonological variation in Makkan Arabic**

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In oral Makkan Arabic, Standard Arabic coronal fricatives [t], [d], and [Dh] coexist alongside the following set of non-standard variants (Al-Jehani 1985), respectively: [t] - [s], [ð] - [z], and [D] - [Z]. Such variation used to be confined to oral speech, as writing is a formal genre in which Standard Arabic has been traditionally used. However, the evolution and spread of smart phones and instant mobile messaging services, such as WhatsApp, have triggered a new trend of informal writing in Western and Eastern societies (Baron 2008; Crystal 2008; Deumert & Masinyana 2008; Androutsopoulos 2011), a trend to which the Makkan society is no stranger.

My study will examine how the abovementioned phonological variation is represented in Makkans' WhatsApp messages, and will analyze the linguistic and extra-linguistic variables that determine the choice of standard and non-standard variants. Specifically, we aim to answer the following research questions:

1. Do age, gender, and education level determine the use of standard vs. non-standard variants in WhatsApp messages?
2. Does the topic of the conversation play a role in the use of standard vs. non-standard variants?
3. What insights does the target variation provide into the diglossic situation in Arabic?

Our participants are 42 (18 males and 24 females) native speakers of Makkan Arabic with an age range of 19-73 and diverse levels of education (i.e. public education, university level, and graduate level). 4037 tokens containing ([t], [d], and [Dh]) were collected from their WhatsApp messages during an 8-week period. Data was coded for linguistic (i.e. type of variant, conversation topic) and non-linguistic variables (i.e. age, gender, education level), and statistically analyzed using regression and logistic mixed models.

Results reveal a statistically significant correlation between age and use of linguistic variants, with older participants' messages showing a higher distribution of standard variants. Gender also plays a significant role in the distribution of standard vs. non-standard variants, with female participants using a higher number of non-standard variants than males. Both genders exhibited a statistically significant tendency to resort to standard linguistic variants when discussing topics related to religion, and to use non-standard variants when discussing casual topics (e.g. family life, business, school, and health).

The study demonstrates that males in the Makkan community adopt more formal linguistic variants in their WhatsApp messages than their female counterparts, who prefer to use informal, yet locally prestigious, linguistic variants. In this regard, our results are in line with the previously attested pattern of gender-based oral speech variation in Arabic-speaking communities (Schmidt 1974; Sallam 1980; Abd El-Jawad 1981; Bakir 1986; Daher 1997, 1998). Our findings further suggest that the diglossic situation in Arabic-speaking communities (Altoma 1969, Zughoul 1980, Bassiouney 2009) is making its way into written texts. Thus, it is not implausible to (1) expect a change in the status of Standard Arabic as the only written variety of Arabic and (2) predict that

the continuum of change from *purely standard* to *purely vernacular* Arabic that resulted in various spoken dialects of Standard Arabic might be repeated with written Arabic.

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