

Women leading linguistic change: sociolinguistic reflexes of modernization in multilingual societies

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Abstract

This paper examines gendered patterns of linguistic variation and change in a multilingual society, focusing on Arabic speakers in the Israeli-Palestinian city of Taibeh. Drawing on sociophonetic data from 30 stratified interviews, reading tasks, and spontaneous speech recordings, the study analyzes how women and men differently negotiate phonological variation under conditions of modernization and sustained contact with Hebrew and English. Particular attention is given to the realization of /q/ and /ʕ/, as well as patterns of code-switching and lexical borrowing. The findings show that younger, educated women lead the adoption of urban prestige variants and engage in strategic cross-linguistic practices associated with mobility and professional identity, while older male speakers favor conservative forms linked to local solidarity. These results highlight gender as a central driver of language change in multilingual settings.

Keywords: gender, sociophonetics, Arabic, multilingualism, language change

Introduction

Language change in multilingual societies is rarely a neutral linguistic process. It is shaped by social hierarchies, ideological pressures, and unequal access to linguistic capital. Within sociolinguistic research, gender has long been identified as a key variable in explaining patterns of variation and change, particularly in contexts undergoing rapid social transformation. Women are frequently found to lead linguistic innovation, especially when novel forms carry symbolic associations with prestige, education, or modernity.

This study explores gendered language change within the Arabic-speaking community of Taibeh, an urban Palestinian city in central Israel. The linguistic ecology of Taibeh is characterized by sustained contact between Arabic, Hebrew, and English, alongside processes of urbanization, educational expansion, and labor market integration. These conditions provide fertile ground for examining how speakers mobilize linguistic resources to negotiate identity, belonging, and aspiration.

The paper asks: (1) how do male and female speakers differ in their use of selected phonological variables under conditions of language contact and modernization, and (2) how do these differences reflect broader sociocultural processes in a stratified multilingual society?

Sociolinguistic context: Taibeh as a multilingual ecology

Taibeh is a predominantly Arabic-speaking city whose residents participate daily in Hebrew-dominant institutional domains such as higher education, employment, and public administration. English also functions as a symbolic global language associated with academic success, technology, and professional advancement. As a result, Arabic speakers routinely navigate multiple linguistic systems, each carrying distinct ideological and social meanings.

Within this setting, linguistic choices often index social positioning. Urban speech styles associated with Hebrew-influenced or globalized norms may signal education, mobility, and access to wider networks, while conservative Arabic forms often index local solidarity and cultural continuity. Gender intersects with these dynamics, as women and men experience differential access to public space, education, and professional domains.

Previous research on Arabic sociolinguistics has shown that women are more likely to adopt supra-local or prestige variants, particularly in urban contexts. The present study builds on this work by combining sociophonetic analysis with qualitative interpretation, situating linguistic variation within lived social practices.

Methodology

The study employs a mixed-methods sociolinguistic design. Data were collected from 30 native Arabic speakers residing in Taibeh, stratified by gender, age group (18–30, 31–50, 51+), and education level. The corpus includes semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews, controlled reading tasks containing minimal pairs, and spontaneous conversational speech.

The analysis focuses on two phonological variables with strong sociolinguistic salience: the realization of /q/ and the weakening or reduction of /ʕ/. These variables were selected due to their documented sensitivity to urbanization and contact-induced change in Arabic-speaking communities. Instances of code-switching and lexical borrowing from Hebrew and English were also noted.

Phonetic analysis was conducted using acoustic measurements of relevant tokens, while qualitative interpretation drew on interview content and metalinguistic commentary. This combination allows for both quantitative patterning and socially grounded interpretation.

Results

The results reveal clear gendered patterns of variation. Younger and middle-aged female speakers show a significantly higher frequency of non-traditional realizations of /q/, including glottal and velar variants associated with urban prestige. Similarly, /ʕ/ is frequently weakened or omitted in their speech, particularly in professional or mixed-language contexts.

In contrast, older male speakers overwhelmingly favor conservative realizations of both variables, maintaining emphatic articulations associated with rural or traditional speech norms. These speakers rarely engage in code-switching and explicitly describe their linguistic choices as expressions of authenticity and cultural preservation.

Female speakers, particularly those with higher education, demonstrate strategic code-switching into Hebrew or English, often for pragmatic or stylistic purposes. Borrowed lexical items are embedded smoothly into Arabic discourse and function as markers of competence and modern identity rather than deficiency.

Discussion: gender, prestige, and linguistic agency

The findings support the view that women act as key agents of linguistic change in contexts of social transition. In Taibeh, women's adoption of urban prestige variants reflects not only exposure to contact languages but also active linguistic agency. Phonological and lexical choices are deployed reflexively to navigate professional environments, public interaction, and shifting gender roles.

Men's preference for conservative forms can be understood as a counter-strategy emphasizing continuity and local solidarity. Rather than lagging behind change, these patterns reflect differing ideological orientations toward language and identity.

Importantly, the data show that language contact does not operate uniformly across speakers. Gender mediates access to linguistic resources and shapes the meanings attached to variation, reinforcing the need to analyze language change as socially embedded and ideologically charged.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that language change in multilingual societies is deeply gendered. In the Arabic-speaking community of Taibeh, women lead phonological innovation and cross-linguistic practices that index modernity, mobility, and professional identity. Men, by contrast, tend to maintain conservative forms aligned with cultural continuity.

By foregrounding gender as a central axis of sociolinguistic variation, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how marginalized speakers navigate linguistic hierarchies under conditions of modernization. Language change emerges not as an abstract process, but as a socially situated practice shaped by power, identity, and agency.

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