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Rania Habib  
*Syracuse University*

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## Meaningful Variation and Bidirectional Change in Rural Child and Adolescent Language

### Abstract

This study investigates the spread of two urban features used in Syrian urban centers such as Damascus and Hims to the vernacular Arabic of non-migrant, rural children and adolescents who are residing in the Syrian village of Oyoun Al-Wadi. The first of the two features is the spread of the urban glottal stop in place of the rural voiceless uvular stop. The second is the spread of the low back vowel [a] in place of the rural mid front vowel [e]. The study shows that linguistic change in this village is moving in two opposing directions. Girls continue to use their initially acquired mothers' urban features in their adolescent years, whereas boys who initially acquired and used their mothers' urban features start to switch to the village features around the age of eight and increase their use of these features with age. The study also shows that the observed variation and changes result from the different meanings associated with the urban and rural sounds under investigation, and that these variation and changes are gender- and age-related. In addition, the study shows that the youth's emotional involvement in building a social identity starts in pre-adolescence, which indicates early sociolinguistic maturity and competence in kids.

# Meaningful Variation and Bidirectional Change in Rural Child and Adolescent Language

Rania Habib

## 1 Introduction

Many sociolinguists have investigated variation in urban and suburban centers and in the speech of rural migrants to urban centers (e.g., Gal 1978, Kerswill 1993, Amara 2005, Habib 2005, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, Miller 2005, Hachimi 2007). Very few studies have dealt with language variation in a rural setting (Walters 1989, 1992, Woidich 1996, Hazen 2002, Ornaghi 2010). Other studies have mainly investigated children’s dialectal acquisition of certain phonological patterns and the age at which those children acquire or stop acquiring those patterns when they migrate from their home country or area to a new country or area (e.g., Payne 1980, Chambers 1992, Kerswill 1996, Kerswill and William 2000, Tagliamonte and Molfenter 2007). Regarding Arabic dialects, rarely has any sociolinguistic study touched on variation and change in children’s and adolescents’ language. This study aims to fill this gap in Arabic dialectology studies. It also partially attempts to fill a gap that exists in presenting “the emerging social meaning of child variation within the family and peer group interactional setting” (Roberts 2004:344).

To fill these gaps, the present study investigates the spread of two urban features used in major Syrian cities such as Damascus and Hims to the vernacular Arabic of non-migrant, rural children and adolescents residing in the Syrian village of Oyoun Al-Wadi (cf. Ornaghi 2010). The first of these two features is the spread of the glottal stop [ʔ] (in Arabic *hamza*) in place of the rural voiceless uvular stop [q] (in Arabic *qaf*). The second is the spread of the low back vowel [a] in place of the rural mid front vowel [e]. The variables (q) and (e) are realized in the Arabic variety of Oyoun Al-Wadi and urban varieties such as the ones spoken in Hims and Damascus as shown in Table 1.

Variable	Variants in the speech of speakers from Oyoun Al-Wadi	Variants in urban varieties
(q)	[q] ~ [ʔ] ~ [ɣ]	[ʔ]
(e)	[e] ~ [a] ~ [æ]	[a]

Table 1: Realization of the variables (q) and (e) in the speech of speakers from Oyoun Al-Wadi and urban varieties.

The study shows that linguistic change in this village is moving in two opposing directions. Girls continue to use their initially acquired mothers’ urban features in their adolescent years, whereas boys, who initially acquired and used their mothers’ urban features, start to acquire the village features around the fourth grade (i.e., age eight or nine) and increase their use of these features with age. The study also shows that the observed variation and changes result from the different meanings associated with the urban and rural sounds under investigation, and that these variation and changes are not only gender-related but also age-related (Kerswill 1996).

In light of the observed variation in the speech of rural children and adolescents in the Syrian village of Oyoun Al-Wadi, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the factors that influence the spread of the urban features [ʔ] and [a] in place of [q] and [e] respectively in the speech of rural, non-migrant children and adolescents in villages such as Oyoun Al-Wadi?
- (2) Is the use of the urban features consistent across the sample?
- (3) In what direction is rural child and adolescent linguistic behavior moving?

## 2 Location, Population, and History of Oyoun Al-Wadi

Oyoun Al-Wadi is a majority Christian village administratively under the city of Hims in the mid-

west of Syria. It is located in the northwest of the Hims Governorate, to the west of the city of Hims and on the border of the Tartus Governorate in the southern part of the Alawite Mountains (Jabour 2010). To the west of it is the small town (originally a village) of Mashta Al-Helou; to the east are the villages of Al-Jwaikhat and Trez. The whole region is well-known for tourism. Visitors come both from all over the country and from abroad to enjoy the natural surroundings and the fresh, cooler air in the summer, because it is mainly a mountainous area. This makes the village subject to dialect contact. The village's name means 'The Springs of the Valley' taken from the huge number of running freshwater springs in the village. According to the civil registration bureau statistics for 2005, the population of the village is 2,600 (collected and presented on [www.Mshtawy.com](http://www.Mshtawy.com) by Zakhour Shahem, the Mayor of Oyouun Al-Wadi).<sup>1</sup> However, due to internal and external migration, this number is expected to be less, especially in the winter.

This village constitutes a good focal point for investigation as it has seen many changes in the past three to four decades due to external immigration and internal migration. External immigration to Western countries, particularly the Americas, started towards the end of the nineteenth century and the first third of the twentieth century. Internal migration to urban centers, particularly to Damascus and Hims, was rare until 1939, whereafter it increased slightly. However, in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies, internal migration increased tremendously. In recent years, commuting between rural and urban centers has become easier and much more frequent. More rural people live in urban centers, and thus one would have contact with relatives who live in urban centers more than before. In addition, more people have sought education and jobs in urban centers, which is conducive to contact with urban dialects. Thus, the village is currently in a transformational period, which makes it a hotspot for investigating language variation and change. It also constitutes a good model for other language variations and changes that are going on in other rural areas in Syria, the Arab World, and other parts of the world.

In addition, the village has a rich history that is related to the present linguistic behavior of speakers, particularly the males. The father of Oyouun Al-Wadi is Sabiq Suleiman Ma'louf, from whom most of the village people descend. Sabiq Ma'louf migrated from Kafr 'Oqab in Lebanon in A.D. 1700. When he arrived in Oyouun Al-Wadi, it was called *Oyouun 'Affan* after its Agha's name, 'Affan Agha, by the Turkmens who owned and ruled the area. Around A.D. 1750, The Turkmens fought among themselves and left the area of Oyouun Al-Wadi, Mashta Al-Helou, Al-Jwaikhat, and Trez under the management of Sabiq Ma'louf, who was known for his intelligence, bravery, and strength. He was an agent for the Agha, distributing land to farmers, collecting harvests, and marketing them. The sons and grandchildren of Sabiq Ma'louf were also known for their chivalry, ferocity, and toughness (Ma'louf 1978). These characteristics/values of the father of the village and his sons persist in the mentality of the males in the village and continue to play a role in their present everyday behavior, including their linguistic behavior.

These days illiteracy is rare in the village. The first primary school was opened in 1926. In 1948, the first secondary school in the whole countryside of Syria was established by Dr. Hanna Al-Ma'louf, from the village of Oyouun Al-Wadi (Al-Ma'louf 2008). He established it in the neighboring village Mashta Al-Helou. Before establishing this secondary school, high school education had been just a dream for the local people. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, electricity and paved roads were limited to cities (Habib 2010b:69). In Oyouun Al-Wadi, water and electricity were connected to homes in 1963 and 1965 respectively. The spread of private and public secondary schools led to an increase in education and more people obtaining university degrees. This in its turn led to massive economic migration to cities to take up white-collar jobs instead of working on the farm. In other words, the increase of education led to economic and social developments as well as in the area of health. However, despite the large extent of internal migration and external immigration, the people of Oyouun Al-Wadi retain their pride in their beautiful village and their impetuous demeanor, and maintain very strong ties with their roots, families, and relatives in the village. Their sense of belonging to the village goes very deep.

These strong ties are also reflected in their behavior and relation to neighboring villages. It is worth noting the historical animosity between Mashta Al-Helou and Oyouun Al-Wadi that goes back to A.D. 1879, when a conflict started over the ownership of some land between the two villages (called Al-Qash'at). The feud continued until it was resolved by endowing Mashta Al-Helou

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<sup>1</sup>[www.Mshtawy.com](http://www.Mshtawy.com) is the website of the neighboring town, Mashta Al-Helou.

with the church belonging to Oyoum Al-Wadi, which was located on the border of Mashta Al-Helou. This action led to harsh feelings, and violence broke out upon every visit to the church. The fights were sometimes bloody in that once two were killed from each side. Those uneasy feelings between the two villages continue to the present day. This is reflected in the linguistic differences between the two villages. While contact between two varieties over the years often results in similarities between the two, in the case of Oyoum Al-Wadi and Mashta Al-Helou, the two varieties grew apart. The main difference between the two varieties is that the voiceless uvular stop [q] is produced as [q] in Oyoum Al-Wadi and as [ʔ] in Mashta Al-Helou, e.g., *wiʔeʃ* vs. *wiʔeʃ* 'he fell' respectively. This history between Oyoum Al-Wadi and Mashta Al-Helou will explain the present-day conflict even among the younger generation of children and adolescents regarding the use of [q] and [ʔ], particularly among boys.

It is also worth noting that in the past, marrying women from outside the village was a rarity. When a new woman came to the village, she would be criticized if her dialect did not contain the [q] sound (Al-Ma'louf 2008:93). In the last 20 to 25 years, marriage to women from outside the village became much more common. It could actually be described as a major trend in the village. According to a knowledgeable person from Oyoum Al-Wadi, Jamil Habib (pers. comm. 2010), the number of out-of-town women married to men in the village is 435. The number of local women married to men in the village is about 90. This means that the present-day number of out-of-town married women is about five times the number of local married women. This trend of marrying women from outside also led women from the village to marry men from outside. This increase in marrying women and consequently men from outside the village is not surprising, given the increased migration to urban areas in the late nineteen-sixties and early nineteen-seventies (Habib 2010b). Seeking higher education and jobs in the city increased contact with urban people and with other rural people who came to the city for similar purposes. This increased personal contact led to relationships with outsiders and thus to marriage with those people. Hence, the current family situation in the village is much more diverse than it was 25–30 years ago. In the past, village people mainly communicated with each other while working on their farms, herding the cattle, or harvesting crops and fruits for food. Therefore, they had minimal contact with outsiders. Consequently, they fell in love with each other and got married.

### 3 Methodology and Data

#### 3.1 Speech Sample and Data Collection

The speech sample consists of the naturally occurring speech of 50 speakers ages 6–18. Speakers were recorded during spring 2010 in the village of Oyoum Al-Wadi. The author went initially to the village's schools and visited classes so that the children and adolescents could get to know her. In the classrooms, she was able to collect the contact numbers of the students' parents to obtain their permission to interview and record their children. Schools, teachers, and parents were very helpful and showed great willingness to allow their children to participate in the project. Some of the parents and teachers volunteered information themselves and were also willing to participate in the project. Some recordings took place at the parents' homes. However, it was preferable to carry out the interviews in the author's home after experiencing great difficulty and sound clarity problems at the parents' homes. It is common in the village's culture for visitors to come unexpectedly and interrupt interviews or talk during the interview, which leads to very poor sound quality. Thus, parents were asked if they would send their children to the author's home. They were cooperative.

Data collection was carried out in naturalistic settings to elicit the most natural speech from participants. The interviews, conducted in the presence of family members or friends, initially gathered personal information. All in all, the information solicited concerned the child; his parents; the extended family; the linguistic features and varieties used by family members, friends, and classmates; connection to urban centers and people living in urban centers; degree of contact with speakers that use urban features; and TV programs watched and hours spent watching programs that contain the linguistic features under investigation. The informal interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes with each individual speaker. A high quality digital recorder (Marantz Professional Solid State Recorder PMD660) was used with a built-in microphone to record the interviews. The built-in microphone was used to avoid drawing the participant's attention to the recorder, and

thus to elicit the most naturalistic speech possible. During the interviews, children and adolescents were asked to tell stories or jokes or talk about some event or story that affected them, their friends, their family, or others, or that they had heard about recently in the news or from acquaintances.

The choice of the village Oyoun Al-Wadi was based on a number of reasons (Section 2). In relation to data collection, two reasons play a significant part in obtaining the most naturalistic and suitable data for the study. First, the author is familiar with the village and its culture and is acquainted with the variety spoken in the village. Second, she is an in-group member, which allowed her to integrate easily into the community, obtain the most naturalistic data, and compile an abundance of information about the participants, their families, their practices, their likes and dislikes, and the societal and cultural changes that are taking place, etc.

### 3.2 Social Factors

The social factors taken into consideration in this study were gender, age, mother's origin, and area of residence. As regards gender, the sample was divided equally between 25 males and 25 females. The sample was then divided into four age groups that were almost equally divided regarding the number of participants and the number of girls and boys in each group. The youngest age group contained 12 speakers aged 6 to 8, of which 6 were girls and 6 were boys. The second age group contained 13 speakers aged 9 to 11, of which 6 were girls and 7 were boys. The third age group contained 13 speakers aged 12 to 14, of which 7 were girls and 6 were boys. The oldest age group contained 12 speakers aged 15 to 18, of which 6 were girls and 6 were boys. There were 12 mothers from Oyoun Al-Wadi and 38 mothers originating from outside Oyoun Al-Wadi. This is not surprising given the large difference in the number of married women from Oyoun Al-Wadi and from outside Oyoun Al-Wadi. As for the area of residence, 31 speakers came from *l-Hara l-Fu[?]/[q]aniyyi* 'the Upper Quarter'; 15 speakers came from *l-Hara t-Tiht[a:]/[e:]niyyi* 'the Lower Quarter'; and four speakers came from *Harit l-Madraj* 'the Downhill Quarter'.

It is worth noting that there is also a kind of tension between the Lower and Upper Quarters. The people from the Lower Quarter think that they are more sophisticated than the people from the Upper Quarter, even in their speech, i.e., that they are more urbanized and use more urban features in their speech. They even call the Upper Quarter *l-rif* 'the countryside/the village' and they call the Lower Quarter *l-madini* 'the city'. In reality, no difference is observed between the two quarters, as the quantitative results will show (Sections 4.2 and 4.3). They are mainly perceptual differences based on subjective feelings of superiority, even though the people from the Upper Quarter seem to acquire more wealth and own more land in the village than those from the Lower Quarter.

### 3.3 Data

#### 3.3.1 The Variable (q)

The total number of tokens for the variable (q), which is produced as one of the variants [q], [ʔ], and [ɣ] in the speech of the 50 participants is 5,148, which is distributed as follows. The total number of tokens produced with [q] is 1,087, which constitutes 21% of the total number of tokens for the variable (q). The total number of tokens produced with [ʔ] is 4,035, which constitutes 78% of the total number of tokens for the variable (q). The use of [ɣ] is insignificant, as it constitutes less than 1% with a limited number of tokens, 26 tokens. Thus, the data shows that there is a general tendency among children and adolescents towards the use of the urban form [ʔ], and a great degree of inter-speaker variation. Comparing the linguistic behavior of boys and girls across the different age groups reveals the following: boys and girls behave similarly in the youngest age group (Table 2); and girls maintain their use of the urban form [ʔ] throughout their adolescence, while boys show higher percentages of the rural form from age nine and up (Table 2). Table 2 shows that in the age groups 9–11, 12–14, and 15–18 three out of seven boys, four out of six boys, and three out of six boys respectively use very high percentages of [q]. All other speakers use percentages of [q] that range between 0 and 28%, with the higher percentages used by boys. This indicates that girls show a greater tendency towards the use of the urban form than boys do. There is a clear shift in their speech towards the urban form [ʔ]. On the other hand, boys show more inter-speaker variation and a greater tendency towards the rural form. About half the boys use more [q]

than [ʔ] in the three older age groups.

Age group	Girls' behavior	Boys' behavior	Details
6–8	Mainly [ʔ]	Mainly [ʔ]	No difference
9–11	Mainly [ʔ]	3/7 boys use high percentage of [q]	George K (4 <sup>th</sup> grade, 9) = 89% Rimon (5 <sup>th</sup> grade, 11) = 46.5% Laith (6 <sup>th</sup> grade, 11) = 97%
12–14	Mainly [ʔ]	4/6 boys use high percentage of [q]	Firas (7 <sup>th</sup> grade, 12) = 100% 'Amjad (8 <sup>th</sup> grade, 13) = 89% Robeer (8 <sup>th</sup> grade, 14) = 95% Mazen (9 <sup>th</sup> grade, 14) = 86%
15–18	Mainly [ʔ]	3/6 boys use high percentage of [q]	Bitros (10 <sup>th</sup> grade, 15) = 82% Milad (11 <sup>th</sup> grade, 16) = 43% 'Amer D (12 <sup>th</sup> grade, 18) = 97%

Table 2: Gender and age group differences in the use of [q] and [ʔ].

### 3.3.2 The Variable (e)

The total number of tokens for the variable (e) that is produced as one of the variants [e], [a], and [æ] in the speech of the 50 participants is 3,105, which is distributed as follows. The total number of tokens produced with [e] is 889, which constitutes 29% of the total number of tokens. The total number of tokens produced with [a] is 2,154, which constitutes 69% of the total number of tokens. The use of [æ] is insignificant, as it constitutes about 2% with a number of tokens limited to 62. Thus, the data show that there is a general tendency towards the use of the urban form [a]. The data also show more intra-speaker variation in vowel usage than in [q] and [ʔ] usage, which is characterized with more inter-speaker variation. Fourteen speakers use the rural form [e] nearly half or more than half the time. Twelve of these speakers are boys. Thus, girls tend to use the urban vowel more.

## 4 Quantitative Analysis and Results

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform the statistical analyses. The social distribution of each speaker and the number of tokens produced by each speaker were entered into SPSS as separate variables and variants respectively. Bivariate correlation tests were carried out to look for correlations between the use of the rural and urban forms. Because of observed skewness in the data, negative binomial regression tests were carried out to investigate the main effects of the social factors on the use of each of the linguistic variants. Results of these various tests are reported in the following sections.

### 4.1 Bivariate Correlation

Examining the correlation between the use of the rural forms [q] and [e], and between the urban forms [ʔ] and [a] reveals significant positive correlation regarding both the use of the rural forms [q] and [e] ( $p = 0.000$ ;  $R = 0.558$ ), and the urban forms [ʔ] and [a] ( $p = 0.001$ ;  $R = 0.552$ ).

### 4.2 Distribution of Variants According to the Social Factors under Investigation

Examining the distribution of the variants according to gender reveals that girls use urban forms more than boys (Figure 1). This difference between girls and boys is more evident in the case of [q] and [ʔ]. The distribution of variants across age groups shows a slight difference concerning the vowel variants (Figure 2). However, age groups vary considerably in their use of [q] and [ʔ]. Figure 2 shows that the youngest age group uses the most [ʔ]. This use decreases with age. It reaches its lowest use in the age group 12–14. This is not surprising given the fact that four out of six boys in this age group use very high percentages of [q] and almost no [ʔ]. The use of [ʔ] increases slightly in the oldest age group. This requires further investigation because it could be due to a

number of factors that are beyond the scope of this study. The distribution of variants based on whether the speaker's mother is from Oyoun Al-Wadi or not reveals that the difference is minor, particularly regarding the vowel variants (Figure 3). Furthermore, the distribution of variants according to area of residence shows there is no noticeable difference between the residents of the Upper and Lower Quarters (Figure 4). However, the difference is great between these two Quarters and the Downhill Quarter. The residents of this Quarter have almost 100% use of [q] and almost no use of [ʔ]. This is because the Downhill Quarter is somehow isolated from the rest of the village. Most of the people who live in this Quarter are either descended from the original residents of Oyoun Al-Wadi or members of a few Alawite families who settled much later in the village and whose speech is characterized by [q] (Habib 2010b:68).

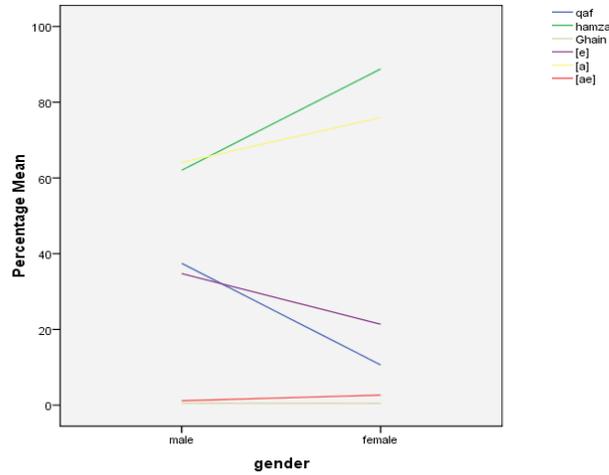


Figure 1: Distribution of variants according to gender.

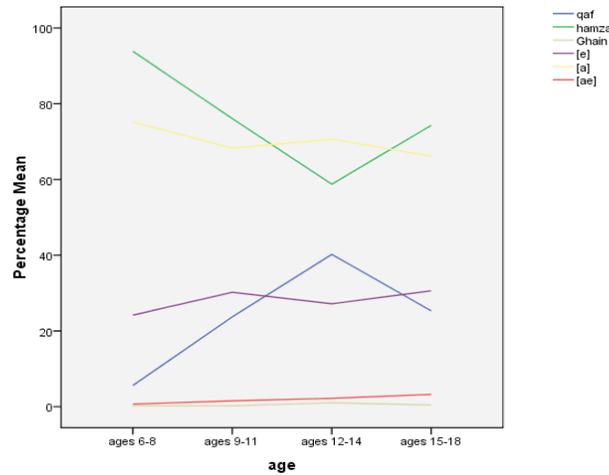


Figure 2: Distribution of variants according to age group.

#### 4.3 Results of the Negative Binomial Regression Test

The negative binomial regression test showed that age and gender play a significant role regarding the use of [q] (Table 3). Gender and area of residence play significant roles regarding the use of [ʔ]. Because of the very low usage of [ʔ], the results of the regression test regarding [ʔ] are not important in this study. What is interesting is that mother's origin emerged as insignificant, that is,

it does not play a role in the observed inter-speaker variation in the use of [q] and [ʔ]. Social factors do not seem to play a role regarding the use of the vowel variants. These results may sound surprising, given the positive correlation found between the rural forms and the urban forms (Section 4.1). The lack of main effects of social factors on the vowel variants is believed to be due to the acquisition and deletion of phonological rules that will be explored in a separate paper.

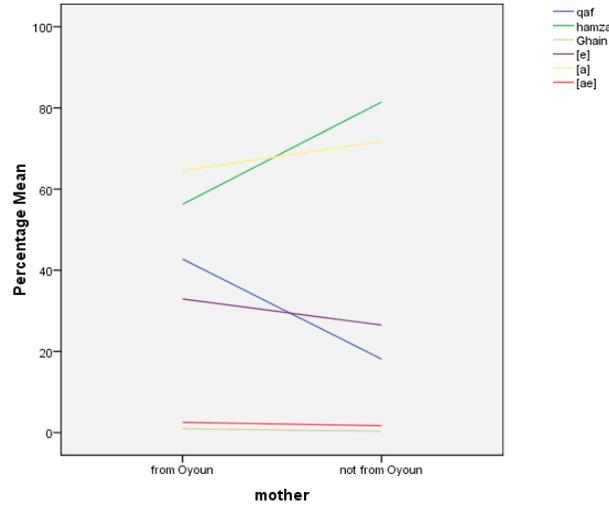


Figure 3: Distribution of variants according to mother's origin.

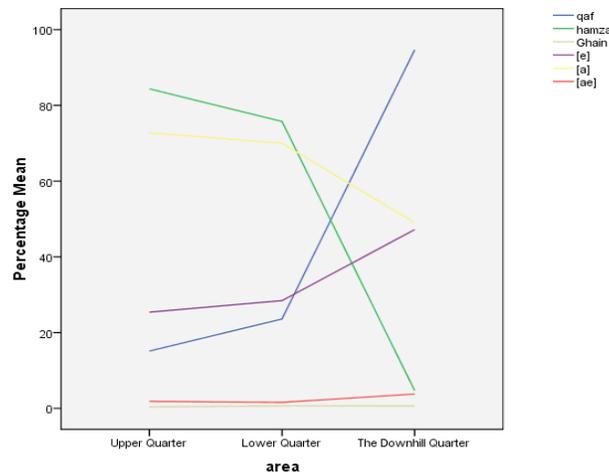


Figure 4: Distribution of variants according to area of residence.

Independent factor	[q]	[ʔ]	[Ɂ]	[e]	[a]	[æ]
Gender	<b>0.043</b>	<b>0.040</b>	<b>0.003</b>	0.339	0.500	0.175
Age	<b>0.004</b>	0.641	<b>0.036</b>	0.214	0.243	<b>0.013</b>
Mother's origin	0.458	0.851	—	0.697	0.980	0.929
Area	0.395	<b>0.000</b>	<b>0.003</b>	0.972	0.362	0.692

Table 3: Main effects of gender, age, mother's origin, and area on the use of the variants [q], [ʔ], [Ɂ], [e], [a], and [æ].

#### 4.4 Discussion of the Results in Light of the Ethnographic Investigation and Findings

The observations made in this study required further ethnographic investigation to explain the findings. During the interviews and informal conversations, many male speakers, parents, and siblings mentioned that they noticed themselves, their son, or their brother respectively change his speech (i.e., started using the [q] sound) around the fourth or fifth grade, i.e., around eight or nine years of age. A couple of speakers mentioned the third grade, and one sister mentioned that she noticed her brother started changing in the first grade.

The social meanings of the urban and rural variants were also extracted from the interviews. Only a brief summary of these extracted social meanings is presented in this paper due to limitations of space. Many girls said that they do not like the *qaf* sound for reasons such as being unpleasant, ugly, harsh, not soft, and old-fashioned. They feel it is for men and that it requires more effort in pronunciation (i.e., more stress or pressure is used in its pronunciation). For them, *qaf* is *Dai'aje* 'rural' and shameful. On the other hand, *ʔaf*,<sup>2</sup> for them, is nicer, prettier, better, softer, gentler, and more refined for girls. *ʔaf* is *Nahawe*, literally 'grammatical', but it refers to the urban form in the village sense of the word. Boys and parents also mentioned these reasons to explain why girls use or should use [ʔ]. Some boys also mentioned these reasons for their use of *ʔaf*.

On the other hand, most boys like the *qaf* sound more for reasons such as manliness, masculinity, immensity, strength, and power. It makes them feel like men like their fathers. For some, it is more suitable, nicer, and easier for them (in the sense that it comes more naturally to them). It makes them feel they belong to the village and not feel like strangers. Some of them use it to satisfy the father or spite the mother or to show independence and individuality. The sound [q] gives them a strong feeling of association with their village and represents for them features of their village: strength, valor, and toughness.

Boys may ridicule other boys if they use *ʔaf*, giving them names such as *Mishtawe* (i.e., a person from Mashta Al-Helou) and *tant* literally 'aunt', but which is used to mean 'gay' or 'weak' in the village (cf. El-Wer 2007:67). These meanings are associated with *ʔaf* among boys in the village. It is worth noting that some of them associate the word *Mishtawe* with *tant*. Thus, accusing someone of being *Mishtawe* means that one is from Mashta Al-Helou and thus betraying his roots and supporting his adversaries. This is also considered an insult to a boy from Oyoum Al-Wadi because it indicates weakness given the association of *Mishtawe* with *tant* and thus weakness. This linguistic reaction of the village's boys is not surprising as ridicule (Stanford 2008) and peer pressure (Romaine 1995:238) have been indicated as major influences on children's speech.

However, despite these conflicts we observe some boys move on with their lives regardless of what their friends may call them. They maintain extensive use of [ʔ]. This indicates there is a linguistic conflict that results from oppositional forces. These forces work at the intra- and inter-speaker levels. These forces will be called centrifugal forces and centripetal forces. Centrifugal forces refer to the external social forces and the prestige brought about by the urban forms. Centripetal forces refer to the village sense of belonging and male values such as toughness, masculinity, ferocity, etc. Sometimes the centrifugal forces overcome the centripetal forces and vice versa.

In addition, speakers mentioned that the area they grow up in or their surrounding environment influences their speech. Some girls mentioned that boys are allowed more freedom of movement than girls are, and thus have more opportunities to communicate with the traditional village people in the street outside their homes. More contact with the village environment and with male friends allows them to use more [q]. On the other hand, girls have less freedom of movement; they mostly stay at home with their mothers. Even their contact with their female friends is limited to the homes of each one of them. Hence, they retain their mothers' forms. Furthermore, there are very limited friendships between boys and girls in the village, which limits communication between them as well as mutual linguistic influence.

## 5 Conclusion

This study shows a wide spread of the urban features among the village's youth. However, there

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<sup>2</sup>They use the word *ʔaf* to indicate *hamza*, replacing the [q] of *qaf* with [ʔ] as a convention of their pronunciation of *qaf*.

seem to be two linguistic trends that are gender- and age-related. The spread of urban features is retained in the girls' speech in their adolescence but overturned towards the rural features in the boys' speech. Boys who, like girls, acquired their out-of-town mothers' features initially start around the age of eight switching to the village features because they carry meanings of vigor, bravery, virility, masculinity, and a strong sense of belonging to the village. Girls, on the other hand, are encouraged and continue to use the urban features because they carry meanings of femininity, softness, delicateness, and refinement. At the age of eight, boys start conceptualizing the various meanings associated with the rural and urban forms and refuse to identify with the latter meanings, abandoning the urban features and adopting the rural forms around the fourth grade.

Variation in adolescent language has been investigated by many, but mainly in urban and suburban areas, indicating that "emotional involvement in social identity" is more salient in adolescence than at any other stage of life (Eckert 1988:206, 1991). The desire to have distinct social identities makes adolescents significant bearers of language change (Eckert 1988, 1991, Kerswill 1996:198). The present study focused rather on a rural community and found that the youth's emotional involvement in building a social identity starts earlier in life than in adolescence (i.e., in pre-adolescence). The boys' desire to have a social identity distinct from girls, i.e., an identity that is charged with masculinity and manliness, emerges as early as eight years of age. In some cases, it starts earlier. This finding is significant because it relates to the age in which children start conceptualizing the social meaning of linguistic variables and implementing this social knowledge in their speech. It reflects on the linguistic maturity and sociolinguistic competence of kids and their ability to differentiate and choose among linguistic variants at an early stage of their life. These children's linguistic behavior accords with Kerswill's (1996:181) definition of sociolinguistic competence as "a person's ability to recognize language varieties within the community, to evaluate those varieties socially, and to exploit them in the communication of social meaning."

In this study, it is apparent that the social and psychological development of children and the development of the social meanings of sounds are concurrent at every stage of their lives. However, age grading (Macaulay 1977, Chambers 2009:200–201, Coupland 2001:189) is more apparent in boys' than in girls' linguistic behavior because change in their speech occurs during their life span. As soon as they start recognizing the importance of certain sounds to the development of their village identity, boys deviate from their mothers' forms. The fact that girls do not deviate from their mothers' forms does not mean that age grading is absent altogether. Age grading in the girls' case is apparent in the story of a 13-year-old girl who used the village form earlier on in her life and then adopted the urban form in her early adolescence years out of friendly, familial, and societal encouragement to sound more refined and soft.

Thus, the different social meanings of the urban and rural sounds identified in this study lead to salient linguistic differences between boys and girls and among boys from different age cohorts, resulting in the acquisition of different features at different stages in their lives and to bidirectional linguistic changes in youth language within the same community.

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