

Title:

Women Leading Linguistic Change: Sociolinguistic Reflexes of Modernization in Multilingual Societies

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Abstract:

This keynote presentation explores sociolinguistic dynamics of language change and variation in a multilingual society, with a particular focus on how gender mediates linguistic innovation. Drawing on data from my doctoral research conducted in the Israeli-Palestinian city of Tāibeh, the study investigates how sustained contact with Hebrew and English, alongside processes of modernization and globalization, influences Arabic usage among different speaker groups—especially women.

The research emphasizes how key phonological variables such as the realization of /q/, /ʕ/, and /tʃ/ as well as code-switching, borrowing, and register-shifting behaviors, reflect broader patterns of identity negotiation and social transformation. For example, the study documents the replacement of /q/ with [ʔ] or [k] in urban female speech, and the rising frequency of /ʕ/ being weakened or omitted in professional or mixed-language contexts. These phonetic tendencies are supported by rich acoustic data, including spectrographic measurements and waveform visualizations, which clearly show acoustic variation across age and gender groups.

Methodologically, the research utilized a mixed-methods design. Data collection included over 30 in-depth sociolinguistic interviews, structured reading tasks with minimal pair sets, spontaneous conversational recordings, and ethnographic observation. The speaker sample was stratified by age, gender, and education level. Analysis reveals that younger, educated women increasingly adopt what I term “urban prestige variants” and demonstrate strategic code-switching into Hebrew or English for pragmatic and stylistic purposes particularly in professional, academic, or public settings. Examples include Hebrew lexical items like *yoter* (“more”) and English terms such as *manager* and *presentation*, embedded within Arabic discourse.

In contrast, older or less-educated male speakers favor traditional rural variants and rarely engage in code-switching, emphasizing solidarity and cultural preservation. For instance, the emphatic realization of /t/ and /d/, along with conservative vowel backings, were notably more frequent among elder male participants. These findings were further contextualized by metalinguistic commentary: many participants explicitly described accent choice as signaling affiliation, aspiration, or resistance.

This presentation will include illustrative excerpts from audio data, spectrograms, and interview transcripts to concretely demonstrate these sociophonetic shifts. I will show how speakers reflexively manipulate their phonological and lexical choices depending

on audience, setting, and social goals. This demonstrates not only variation, but sociolinguistic agency in real time.

Beyond local analysis, the study situates these patterns within wider theoretical and sociopolitical frameworks. In the stratified linguistic ecology of Israel, Arabic, Hebrew, and English coexist in tension, and linguistic practices often function as forms of symbolic resistance, mobility, or adaptation. Gender, in this context, is not merely a variable but a key axis through which access to linguistic and cultural capital is mediated.

Ultimately, this keynote calls for a reconceptualization of language change in multilingual societies not as a neutral or purely linguistic process, but as a gendered, ideologically loaded, and socially contingent one. By foregrounding the experiences of Arab women as linguistic innovators, we gain a deeper understanding of how marginalized speakers navigate identity, power, and belonging through sound.