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The “White Dialect” of young Arabic speakers from Qassim (Saudi Arabia)

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English Summary

The overall aim of this thesis is to provide a linguistic analysis of the White Dialect (WD) used by young Qassimi Arabic (QA) speakers, investigating when it is used and the reasons for its use. As such, this thesis aims to provide answers to the following research questions: what is the WD used by the young QA speakers, when and where is it used, and why it is used? In addition, this thesis highlights some of the differences between the natural QA speech and WD speech of young QA speakers, as well as the differences between the QA of the older generation (“old QA”) and that of the young generation (“young QA”).

Chapter 1 is an introductory chapter that lays out the research questions and the main goals of the thesis. It also provides an overview of the pilot study, a brief description of the methodology used, and the region in Saudi Arabia where QA is spoken, namely Qassim Province. This chapter also provides a description of the linguistic situation in Qassim and highlights the issue that Saudi Arabia is a country that does not have an official national dialect; rather, each region has its own ethnic or regional dialect.

Chapter 2 presents the methodology adopted in this investigation. The data collected as part of this investigation comprise the following: old QA speech, QA speech as used among young QA speakers, WD speech produced by young QA speakers, and young QA speakers’ views about the WD. The old QA speech data were collected from 20 older participants (10 male and 10 female) in open interviews. As for the young generation, the data were collected in three stages, implemented in three data collection sessions. Stage 1 consisted of pair interviews, and targeted the speech of young QA speakers among each other. Young QA speakers were grouped in pairs to discuss two different types of topics (casual and formal) in a naturalistic setting to investigate the effect of topic on their language use. Stage 2 concerned the collection of social media posts. The young QA participants were asked to provide audio or video recordings that they had posted publicly on social media. Each participant was asked to provide two posts, one for a Saudi audience, and another for Arabic speakers in general. This second stage targeted the WD used by young QA speakers, as participants in the pilot study revealed that the main trigger for using the WD is the audience. This stage was inspired by Bell’s Audience Design (1984). Stage 3 comprised open interviews with the young QA speakers. The open interviews were conducted to collect data relating to two aspects of the research: the main linguistic variants to be investigated in this study, and speakers’ perceptions of the WD. The

data in Stage 1 and Stage 2 were analysed quantitatively; meanwhile, the open interview in Stage 3 was analysed qualitatively using the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), in which key themes were drawn from the participants’ answers (Chapter 7). A third sociolinguistic approach was also adopted in the selection of young participants in this investigation: Schilling-Estes’ Speaker Design approach (2002), which focuses on the speaker as the main cause of stylistic change. In the pilot study, the participants described the stereotypical character of a Qassimi person: a conservative religious character who is not very welcoming of outsiders. It is possible that the use of the WD could be an attempt to escape this stereotypical image. Of the ten participants selected per gender, five participants were chosen as they had received a special religious education, while the other five had received a normal public education. This is to explore the effect of religious education on participants’ language use, as a stereotype relating to this theme emerged from the pilot study with young QA speakers.

Chapter 3 introduces QA and the way it is studied here. It consists of two parts. The first part presents the QA linguistic variants that are investigated in this study. The second part discusses some issues encountered in previous research conducted on QA. The linguistic variables in this investigation were determined on the basis of the interviews with the young participants. In the open interview (the last stage of data collection with the young QA speakers), participants were asked one of the two following questions: how do you know a QA speaker when you hear him/her talking in the street? Or: what are the characteristics of QA? The decision to have the participants determine the linguistic variables in this investigation was made following a pilot study. In the pilot study, the participants described the WD as a way to “avoid sounding like a Qassimi”. When they were asked how exactly they did this, they reported that they avoid QA lexical items and “certain sounds” that are found only in QA. Based on their answers, it was hypothesised that the speakers would try to avoid particularly those linguistic features that they are able to identify themselves, since these features reflect their explicit knowledge about their dialect. The six QA variants investigated in this thesis are: the affrication of *k* as *ts* in the stem, the affrication of *k* as *ts* in the 2SG:F pronominal suffix, the affrication of *q* or *g* as *dz*, the use of 1SG:DO suffix pronoun *-n* instead of *-ni*, the absence of the vowel *a* in the 3SG:F suffix pronoun *-h* ~ *-ha*, and the use of 3PL feminine suffix pronoun.

Chapter 4 provides a quantitative analysis of QA as it is used by its speakers in their everyday lives in Al-Qassim. The six QA linguistic variants investigated in this study were compared between two generations: the old and the young speakers. This chapter also explores the effect of the topic being spoken about, the type of education that the participants received, and the participant’s gender on the QA used by the younger speakers. This chapter consists of three parts. The first part presents the results regarding the realisation of the six linguistic variables by the old generation. It provides clear evidence that all six QA linguistic variants investigated

in this study are used extensively by the old QA speakers. This part also shows that there is no significant difference in the use of these QA variants between the old female speakers and old male speakers except in one variant, namely, the affrication of *q* and *g* as *dz*.

The second part of this chapter presents an investigation into the realisation of the six linguistic variables in the speech of the young generation when holding an everyday conversation with friends or family members. Usage of the six QA variants by the young generation was investigated in relation to three social variables: topic of discussion (personal or serious topics), type of education, and gender. In general, the results showed that these three social variables do not have a major influence on the use of the six QA variants by the young generation. However, there were important differences with the old QA speakers. The young QA speakers showed extensive use of only three variants: the affrication *k* as *ts* in the 2SG:F pronominal suffix, the use of 1SG:DO suffix pronoun *-n* instead of *-ni*, and the use of the 3SG:F suffix *-ah*. As for the use of the 3PL feminine suffix pronoun, the younger generation displayed strategies to avoid using this variant. In addition, they showed extremely low usage of the two other QA variables, namely, the affrication of *k* as *ts* in the stem, and the affrication of *q* and *g* as *dz*. This seems to continue a tendency already found among the older generation participants. Besides the investigation of the six QA variants, this second part of the chapter also notes that the two variants *q* and *g* appear to create different words in the dialect as an effect of the diglossic situation.

The chapter concludes with a comparison of old QA and young QA. It suggests a reason for the low frequency of two variants—the affrication of *k* as *ts* in the stem, and the affrication of *q* and *g* as *dz*—in the speech of the young generation. The difference between the two generations with regard to these two variables can be attributed to the lexical choices of the young generation, as they tend to substitute words containing *dz* or *ts* in the stem with newer, more common lexical items. It should be noted, however, that the linguistic differences between the two generations are not limited to the six variants investigated in this study; they include other phonological, syntactic, and semantic differences as well as differences in narration style.

Chapter 5 provides a description of how the six QA variants chosen for this investigation are treated in the WD. The use of the six QA variants in the WD data was noticeably lower than in the data of QA as used by young people among each other, which indicates that the young QA speakers avoid the QA variants when using the WD. However, the level of avoidance is not the same for all the variants investigated. The results show that two QA variants in particular, namely the use of 1SG:DO suffix pronoun *-n* instead of *-ni* and the use of the 3SG:F feminine suffix *-ah*, were hardly avoided of the six QA variants. The rate of use of these two variants in the WD data corresponds to their rate of use in the in-group QA data. The results in this chapter also suggest that the use of the six QA variants in the WD may be lower

when speakers are addressing a general Arabic-speaking audience versus a Saudi audience. However, this difference is only statistically significant for one of the six variants in one gender, namely the 3SG:F suffix pronoun *-ah* in the male group.

Chapter 6 provides further linguistic analysis of the WD used by the young QA speakers, going beyond the investigation of the use of the QA variants in the WD as presented in the previous chapters. This chapter sheds light on the main characteristic of the WD used by the young QA speakers, which is its fluidity. Results show that the young speakers use more than one Arabic variety in their WD speech, and that Standard Arabic (SA) does not need to be present in a WD sentence. This mix of Arabic varieties is detected in terms of system morphemes, which provide the grammatical frame of the sentence, as well as in content morphemes, such as verbs, nouns, and adjectives. The data clearly show that a WD sentence typically involves system morphemes from several varieties, which goes against the predictions of the Myers Scotton’s Matrix Language Frame model (1993, 1997, 1998). The WD data reveal that the participants in this investigation make use of a core set of Arabic varieties, including three Saudi dialects (QA, Riyadh Arabic (RA), and Hijazi Arabic) and other Arabic varieties (such as SA, Kuwaiti Arabic, and Egyptian Arabic). However, the WD may include yet more varieties depending on speakers’ exposure or attitudes to these other varieties, as shown by their occasional use in the data. Therefore, with a larger group of participants and more extensive data collection, elements from still other varieties will likely emerge in the WD speech of young QA speakers besides the ones mentioned above.

Chapter 7 presents the perception of the WD by three groups: the young users of the WD (i.e. the young participants in this research), media presenters, and Arab linguists. The three groups are not in alignment when it comes to defining the WD. Within the first group—young QA speakers—there are also differences of opinion on how to define the WD. Some young participants believe it is the form of Arabic that results from their attempt to shift to RA. Other young speakers believe that the term “White Dialect” is simply another name for RA, while yet others believe the WD to be an Arabic dialect without a homeland. Media figures and Arab linguists, on the other hand, fall into two groups: those who believe the WD is a mix between Arabic dialects and SA, and those who believe it is a simplified form of SA that dispenses with strict grammatical rules such as number agreement or case marking. None of these views accurately reflect the reality of the WD as a fluid form that does not necessarily use SA linguistic features (as discussed in Chapter 6). Therefore, the ideology of the WD might contrast with the reality of its use. As for when the WD is used, the young QA speakers seem to use the WD as an out-group dialect with non-QA speakers both within and beyond the Qassim region. They also reveal that they use the WD with other QA speakers in official governmental institutions and certain formal occasions, such as giving a presentation at Qassim University. As for media presenters and Arab linguists, both discuss the WD as a spoken Arabic form used in

media such as television programmes, radio broadcasts and social media, without discussing its possibility for use in day-to-day communication.

Even though the reasons for using the WD vary among the three groups, all groups align with regard to one reason: namely, that the WD is used to ease communication between speakers of different Arabic dialects. For the young QA speakers, the WD helps them to avoid being framed in the stereotypical image of Qassimi people as religiously intolerant. In addition, they also seem to use it for the prestige it confers, and to hide their Qassimi identity. A few young QA speakers hinted that using the WD is a modest behaviour which they adopt in order to be equal with their interlocutors, as they believe that Qassimi people tend to be of higher social standing within Saudi Arabia. As for the media presenters and Arab linguists, the WD is used because it is easier than pure SA, and is more intelligible for speakers of various Arabic dialects compared to using colloquial forms.

Chapter 8 discusses the WD as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. The WD does not appear to be a dialect, but rather a fluid, unstable, spontaneous way of speaking that young people use when talking directly or indirectly to people from outside their dialect community, or in situations where they feel pure SA is too formal but their vernacular is too informal. The WD seems to be a linguistic strategy that is formed by means of three main processes. The first process is de-localisation, where speakers shift away from their vernacular by avoiding stigmatised features in their dialect. The second process is the adoption of a prestige variety. In the current study, two prestige varieties were observed: Riyadh Arabic and SA. The third process is admixture with various other Arabic dialects and English. In the current study, many Arabic varieties were used in this process, of which four varieties were found among more than half of the participants: Riyadh Arabic, Hijazi Arabic, Kuwaiti Arabic, and Egyptian Arabic. Still, it should not be assumed that every young QA speaker uses each of these four varieties, as exposure and attitudes to different varieties might have an influence on the WD, and these factors may differ among speakers. Considering that the 20 participants in this investigation were picked from the same or similar social circles, they might have similar linguistic exposure. Thus, there is a strong possibility that other Arabic varieties might be included in the mix if the investigation were conducted with a larger group of QA participants from different networks. Further study is also needed to investigate whether exposure and attitudes toward the various Arabic varieties play a significant role in the use of these varieties in the WD of the QA speakers.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis. In this chapter, I reflect that the label “dialect” does not seem to be a fitting description of the WD; rather, the WD is a linguistic strategy in which Arabic speakers can adopt linguistic features from the range of different Arabic varieties available to them, to produce a spontaneous and fluid form of Arabic that serves their desired communicative motives.

