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

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Introduction

1.1 Overview

This thesis is about speech habits by young people from the Qassim region in central Saudi Arabia. It focuses on the way they speak when addressing people who are not from their home region. This way of speaking is referred to by its users as *al-laḥḍāḥ al-beiḍʿa*: in the Qassimi dialect of Arabic, or *al-laḥḍāḥ al-baiḍʿa*:ʔ in Standard Arabic, both meaning “White Dialect”. While this term is used more generally in Saudi Arabia, it may not always refer to the same type of entity (see section 7.2.2 for more discussion). In this thesis, the term “White Dialect” (WD) is used exclusively in the way it is used by the young Qassimi speakers that participated in this research.

The WD is not a dialect in the common linguistic sense, with relatively stable forms and a clear grounding in one or another group. It is defined by its intended audience, people who are not Qassimi Arabic speakers. According to the users themselves, its main function is to enhance comprehension by the listener, and to make the Qassimi background of the speaker less obvious (chapter 7). The term White Dialect is retained here, because it is the term used by the speakers themselves, and thus implies a certain awareness of it as a variety different from other varieties.

In order to study the WD, a corpus was established consisting of, in total, forty spoken social media posts addressing a non-Qassimi audience. This was considered a typical situation for the use of the WD by the participants themselves. These media posts were submitted to a linguistic analysis in order to establish their main linguistic characteristics (chapters 5, 6, and 8.3). In a sense, therefore, the WD described in this thesis is the WD of social media posts. For practical reasons (see 5.1.1), it was impossible to make recordings of face-to-face conversations with people from outside Qassim, so it is impossible to say if language use would be the same

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there as in the social media posts. From my own experience as a user of the Qassimi WD I would assume that the differences are not extremely large.

As the WD is one among several different codes used by young Qassimi Arabic speakers, it was deemed necessary also to take a look at their in-group code, used when speaking to intimate friends or family members from Qassim. For this purpose, paired recordings were made involving the same participants as those who produced the social media posts (chapter 4.2). Moreover, I also did paired interviews with older Qassimi speakers to provide further background to the younger people’s speech habits (chapter 4.1).

The analysis of the WD speech in the social media posts shows that it is characterised by large-scale intra- and inter-speaker variation (chapter 6). Instead of considering it a variety on its own, it is better to look at it as a strategy involving different strategic choices between different linguistic elements from the many different varieties available to the young Qassimi speakers: Qassimi Arabic (which is mostly suppressed, but not entirely so, see chapter 5), the Arabic of the capital Riyadh, and Standard Arabic, the official language of the country. Moreover, WD may also make use of materials from other Arabic varieties and English (chapters 6 and 8).

In the following, some basic notions of the language situation in Qassim and in Saudi Arabia will be provided. This will be followed by an introduction to the methods used in this thesis, and a thesis outline.

1.2 Qassimi Arabic

Qassimi Arabic (QA) is spoken mainly in Qassim Province, which is located in the Najd region in central Saudi Arabia. It is a sedentary dialect, as it is spoken only by the sedentary populations of Qassim Province known as *Hadhari* (Ingham, 1994). Al-Rojaie (2020b) notes that there is no statistical data on the total number of QA speakers, but estimates the number of speakers to lie between 500,000 and 600,000. This estimate is based on information provided by the Saudi Central Department of Statistics and Information (2010), which gives the population of the Qassim region as approximately 1 million, while taking into account that more than half of the

population of Qassim are sedentary people who, Al-Rojaie assumes, would mostly speak QA.

Al-Jumaah (2017) points out that QA is spoken mainly by the sedentary tribes of urban Qassim cities and small villages. He highlights four major cities where QA is spoken intensively—Buraydah, Unayzah, Arras, and Albukayriah—as well as other smaller towns such as Almithnab, Albadayea, Alkhabra, Riyadh Alkhabra, and Ashimasiyah. It is important to mention that Al-Jumaah (2016a) does not include in this classification the Qassim cities of Aljawa and Alasyah and the towns in the northeast area of Qassim. The reason for this is his finding that the speech of the inhabitants of these areas manifests certain features that are not found in the other places in Qassim. There are many Bedouin tribes living in the Qassim region who speak their own tribal dialects even though they live side-by-side with the sedentary inhabitants of the Qassim region in the same cities (Al-Jumaah, 2016a; Al-Ubudi, 1979). QA, as noted by Al-Rojaie (2020b), is also spoken outside Qassim Province in major Saudi cities such as Riyadh, Medina, Mecca, and Dammam by Qassimi people who migrated there.

Al-Rojaie (2020b) speculates that QA, in its current form, is probably a koine that resulted from contact between the different dialects of the sedentary tribes who settled in the Qassim region in the 13th–17th century, such as the Tay and the Tamim. Al-Rojaie also mentions that the modern Arabic dialect spoken in the Bedouin settlements in Qassim by tribes such as the Harb, Mutair, Rashidi, and Utaibah has not directly affected QA, as the speakers of these tribal dialects settled in the Qassim region in the early part of the 20th century, that is, “after QA evolved into its current form” (2020b, 12).

Figure 1.1. Map of Saudi Arabia showing Qassim Province shaded in red¹.



1.3 The sociolinguistic situation in Qassim

The sociolinguistic situation in Saudi Arabia, as in most Arabic speaking countries, is very complex, characterised by diglossia and dialectal diversity. According to Ingham (2006), many languages besides Arabic are spoken in Saudi Arabia. In particular, non-Arabic-speaking immigrants form distinct linguistic communities; this situation is particularly widespread in the Hijaz region, which is the area with the largest immigrant population in the country. Standard Arabic (SA) is the official language of Saudi Arabia, but it is not the form of Arabic used in everyday spoken conversation.

¹ Adapted from: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Al_Qasim_in_Saudi_Arabia.svg. This image is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Instead, most Saudis use their tribal or regional dialects in daily conversations with friends and family. As in most Arabic-speaking countries, SA is used in religious sermons such as during the Friday prayers, and is the language used in formal situations and in written contexts such as textbooks, newspapers, and fiction (Bassiouny, 2006; Van Mol, 2003; Haeri, 2003). Even though SA is not used by young QA speakers in everyday conversations or in informal situations, it is partly present through code-mixing and quoting within their speech. Young QA speakers are exposed to SA from an early age through television, through religious sermons every Friday, in school, and in the media.

Native speakers of QA use this variety in their everyday, informal conversations. However, Riyadh Arabic (RA), one of the Najdi Arabic dialects spoken in the capital Riyadh, is sometimes used, either through code-mixing or within WD speech (as reported by some young QA speakers in the pilot study). RA is a dialect that is considered easy to switch to for almost all young QA speakers, as RA and QA are both Najdi dialects and share many features. Not all young QA speakers have the same level of proficiency in RA; however, the majority of them seem to speak it with a moderate to high level of proficiency. The level of proficiency depends on multiple factors, such as speakers' exposure to RA, whether they have relatives or friends in Riyadh city, or whether they have ever lived in Riyadh. Nowadays, Saudis are also exposed to RA through social media, where it is used extensively by influencers. In addition, some governmental announcements and advertisements from large businesses are composed in RA. Al-Fallu (2020) reports that governmental announcements that are directed to Saudi citizens are composed in a shared colloquial Arabic that all Saudis can understand, while announcements that are directed to all people living in Saudi Arabia (i.e. including residents from other Arabic-speaking countries) are in SA. Therefore, considering the linguistic features shared between QA and RA, along with the intensive daily exposure to RA through social media, advertisements, and some governmental announcements, young QA speakers may be fluent in RA even without having been in direct contact with speakers of this variety.

Young QA speakers are also exposed to other Arabic dialects from within and outside Saudi Arabia. Different tribal dialects are spoken in the Qassim region,

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and their speakers are in contact with QA speakers on an almost daily basis. Sedentary inhabitants of Qassim, who speak QA, and members of Bedouin tribes, who speak their own dialects, live, study and work side-by-side in the same cities. Within the Qassim region, QA speakers are also in contact with the varieties spoken by people from other Arabic-speaking countries who come to work in Saudi Arabia. These include Yemeni Arabic, Egyptian Arabic, Levantine Arabic, Sudanese Arabic and many other varieties. For some QA speakers such contact occurs on a daily basis, as the speakers of these other varieties work in a wide range of professions, including as doctors and university professors. Moreover, the speakers of these varieties typically migrate to Saudi Arabia along with their families, and their children integrate with Qassimi children in schools. Through the media, QA speakers are exposed to other Saudi dialects such as Hijazi Arabic (HA). In the past, exposure was limited to occasions when QA speakers travelled to the Hijaz region to visit the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina; however, nowadays, HA is used on social media by Hijazi influencers and in television programmes. Likewise, QA speakers are exposed to other varieties of Gulf Arabic, such as Kuwaiti Arabic (KA), via social media and television. Besides other varieties of Arabic, QA speakers are exposed to other languages; in particular, they are exposed to English, which has gone from being just the language of Western cinema and television to being the main language of university education in many subjects such as medicine, computer science, mathematics, and engineering. Al-Seghayer (2014) states that English nowadays enjoys a prominent status in Saudi Arabia, as it is the only foreign language taught and used in public and private schools, universities, and in many industrial and governmental institutions. The linguistic situation found in higher education institutions, such as Qassim University, is quite complex, usually involving a mix of Arabic and English. In a typical university classroom of applied sciences or medicine, the main language of teaching is English even though all the students are Saudi and native Arabic speakers. In particular, written materials, assignments and examinations are all in English. However, group discussions within the classroom are mostly in colloquial Arabic. Presentations are prepared in English, but mostly delivered in a mix of Arabic and English. As for the language of administration in Saudi universities, this is always SA. Lastly, it is

important to note that the students in Qassim universities are not all QA speakers: speakers of HA and Bedouin dialects are also enrolled in the same classes. Therefore, in a typical university classroom, the linguistic situation encompasses both English and a multitude of Arabic varieties.

1.4 Linguistic contact in Saudi Arabia

There is no dialect labelled “Saudi Arabic”. That is to say, Saudi Arabia does not have a national dialect; instead, every region or ethnicity speaks their own dialect. Even though SA is the official language in the country, it is restricted to certain formal domains. Even in the capital Riyadh where RA is the main dialect, other varieties such as QA, Bedouin dialects, and southern dialects are widely spoken. Before the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established, tribalism was the predominant form of community identity and political allegiance, especially among Bedouins (Cole, 2003; Maisel, 2014). Following the establishment of Saudi Arabia, sedentary tribes shifted their identity from the tribe to the region that they lived in, and their political affiliation shifted from the chief of the tribe to the state, namely the locus of Saudi political power (Al-Rojaie, 2020a). As a result, sedentary dialects in Saudi Arabia have become regional dialects.

Scholars have classified the dialects of Saudi Arabia according to two different sets of criteria: either a regional classification based on geographical location, or an ethnic classification based on the ethnicity of speakers. When using regional criteria, scholars have classified the Saudi dialects into four major groups: Najdi dialects spoken in the central areas, Eastern dialects, Hijazi dialects spoken in the western areas, and southwestern dialects (Prochazka, 1988; Palva, 2006; Versteegh, 2014). Using ethnic criteria, Saudi dialects have been categorised into two main groups: Bedouin tribal dialects and sedentary dialects. In the past, Bedouins were nomads, while sedentary people were settled in cities and villages. This distinction does no more accurately capture the current situation, as most Saudi populations have now settled in cities, towns, or villages. According to Al-Rojaie

(2021), the term “Bedouin dialects” now relates to the Bedouin ethnicity of the speakers, and not to a nomadic lifestyle.

In a country that is rich with varieties, the contact among these varieties does not always provide mutual intelligibility. Before the rise of the internet and social media, Arabic speakers came into contact with each other’s varieties directly, through travel or meeting face-to-face. These types of contact were limited to those individuals who had such opportunities to meet speakers of other varieties, and even then, it was limited to the few Arabic dialects spoken by expats coming to Saudi for work, such as Egyptian Arabic. Arabic speakers could also be exposed to different varieties via television and radio. Following the spread of the internet, contact with other Arabic varieties appears to be unlimited and easily accessible. The dynamics of contact on social media platforms seem to be different from those of face-to-face contact; in particular, all spoken Arabic varieties can be connected on a single platform.

SA does not seem to be the preferred variety used online by the younger generation. Therefore, it is interesting to consider which variety is most used by Saudis on social media. Unfortunately, there is little scholarship investigating the contact between different Arabic varieties spoken on social media platforms. However, there are a few studies that investigate contact among Saudi dialects in general, such as Al-Essa (2009), which examines contact between two varieties of Arabic spoken in Saudi Arabia: the Najdi dialects and HA. Al-Essa investigated the linguistic change of the Najdi speakers who migrated to Jeddah² city with respect to the affrication of two sounds found in two Najdi dialects (QA and Hail Arabic), namely $k > ts$ and $g > dz$. Al-Essa’s study showed that the Najdi immigrants in Hijaz are giving up the use of these two sounds.

In general, scholars who investigate linguistic change in varieties of Arabic spoken in Saudi Arabia tend to target the permanent changes in speakers’ native dialects, and only a few have focused on the temporary adjustments and changes that speakers make when they are put in a situation of contact with other Arabic varieties.

² Jeddah is one of the major (port) cities in the Hijaz, the western region of Saudi Arabia.

According to the responses of participants in Al-Rojaie's study (2020a), RA is considered by some Saudi nationals to symbolize the closest variety to the Saudi identity; these participants also reported that they use RA occasionally when they want to be understood by other Saudis. However, this is not the case for all Saudis. For example, Alfaifi (2020) mentions that Faifi Arabic³ speakers have a very low level of proficiency in RA compared to SA, which they learn in school and which they often use in their diglossic code-mixing.

The QA speakers in the current research reported that they do not use RA or QA when they speak to non-QA speakers; rather, they switch to what they call the WD. However, both QA and RA are Najdi dialects, and mutual intelligibility has never been a major issue between the two varieties. Therefore, the WD might be used for other reasons beyond mutual intelligibility.

1.5 Methodology

1.5.1 The Pilot

In order to gain some preliminary insight in what is considered the White Dialects by the relevant speakers, and its relation to QA, a pilot study was conducted in order to design the methodology of the main investigation. The pilot study comprised interviews with five young female QA speakers and five young male QA speakers, all of whom were university students. Their responses were the point of departure for designing the methods used in this investigation. The main objectives of the pilot study were to get an idea where and when the WD is used, in order to find out how to collect WD data. In addition, the pilot study aimed to investigate the speakers' ideology of the WD. The data were collected via phone calls, of which audio recordings were made.

The participants reported that the main trigger for using the WD is the audience, as they mainly use it when they talk to non-QA speakers. They also added

³ Faifi Arabic is spoken by the Faifi tribe, who live in the southern region in Saudi Arabia.

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that they use the WD in situations where QA is too informal and Standard Arabic (SA) is too formal. When asked to describe the WD, participants provided a range of different answers; these answers revealed that speakers do not all share the same ideology about the WD, but they are, to some extent, on the same page regarding how it is formed. They reported that when using the WD, they attempt to sound less Qassimi and more like a general Arabic speaker. The participants also expressed that the linguistic features of QA that they mentioned might be associated with negative stereotypes of Qassimi people held by non-Qassimis. Two such stereotypes were often reported: the conservative religious character who is not welcoming to outsiders, and the arrogant rich Qassimi man who thinks that his ethnicity is the elite and the most prestigious in the country.

1.5.2 Research set-up

The data in this thesis were collected from two generations of speakers (referred to in this investigation as the “old” and the “young” QA speakers). The method of data collection for the older generation was based on the Friend-of-a-Friend Approach (Smakman 2018: 230) as used in many previous sociolinguistic studies: data were collected while the speakers were talking naturally to their friends and relatives about their childhood memories and their old traditions, and telling stories from their past.

As for the younger generation, the data were collected in three different stages. Even though the young QA speakers reported in the pilot study that audience is the main trigger for using the WD, it is possible that there are other factors that trigger the use of the WD by the young QA speakers. As a result, the methodology in this thesis is inspired by three different sociolinguistic approaches, in order to investigate the WD from different perspectives. The first approach is Labov’s Attention to Speech approach (1966), which is reflected in the first stage of data collection. The aim of the first stage was to elicit QA speech as used with members of the QA speech community, and also to investigate the effect of topic, gender, and the type of education a speaker had received as possible triggers for the use of the WD by young QA speakers. The second approach is Bell’s Audience Design (1984),

reflected in the second stage of data collection. The aim of this stage was to elicit WD speech while also investigating whether the type of audience affects the WD used by the young QA speakers. The third approach is Schilling-Estes' (2002) Speaker Design approach. This approach is reflected in the process of choosing participants: half of the young QA speakers in this study were individuals who had received a religious education, and the other half had received a normal general 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 (Section 1.5.2). All three approaches and the process of data collection are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

In this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of the thesis and summary of the pilot study conducted for this investigation (Section 1.1). This chapter also provides a description of the linguistic situation in Saudi Arabia and a brief description of the ethnic composition of the QA speaker community.

In Chapter 2, I provide a detailed description of the methodology used in this thesis and a full description of the participants and how they were selected for this research. Chapter 3 contains a general overview of QA. It also provides a brief description of the linguistic variables investigated in this study.

The data are analysed in four chapters (Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7). Chapter 4 reports a quantitative analysis of the QA speech of the young speakers when they speak to other QA speakers. It also highlights some of the differences between the QA used by the old and the young generations. Following that, Chapter 5 provides a quantitative analysis of the WD used by the young QA speakers with respect to the QA linguistic variants chosen for this investigation. Chapter 6 discusses the main features of the WD by using a code-mixing model.

Chapter 7 presents a thematic analysis of the open interview conducted with the young QA speakers, which taps into metadiscourse about WD. Chapter 7 also

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highlights the different perceptions of the WD held by its speakers, people in the media, and linguists.

Chapter 8 offers a discussion of the WD as a sociolinguistic phenomenon. This chapter provides a more fitting description for the WD, as the label “dialect” does not seem to fit this way of speaking. Moreover, Chapter 8 highlights the strategies used by speakers to formulate their WD speech. Lastly, Chapter 9 concludes the thesis by summarising the results and provides suggestions for future research.