Intergenerational Patterns and Prestige Drift: A Diachronic Exploration of Iraqi Arabic in Karbala and Baghdad

[1]Mustafa Talib Mutashar Jabri, Department of English, Isf. C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

mt90iraq@gmail.com

[*2]Bahram Hadian, Department of English, Isf. C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran E-E-*bah.hadian@iau.ac.ir*

[3]Raad Shakir AbdulHasan AlNawas, Department of English, College of Education for Humanities, University of Thi Qar, Iraq

raad.alnawas@gmail.com

[4]Atefeh Sadat Mirsaeedi, Department of English, Isf. C., Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

atefemirsaeedi@iau.ac.ir

Abstract

This inquiry scrutinized temporal linguistic shifts and psycholinguistic dynamics within the Arabic vernaculars of Baghdad and Karbala. Leveraging an apparent-time construct and an intersectional lens, the research parses phonological and morphosyntactic variability among 192 native adult interlocutors, who were demarcated by age, gender, educational attainment, and urbanicity. The findings evince a fluid dialectal topography in which younger, urbanized, and educated cohorts, preeminently women, are spearheading the assimilation of socially valorized variants (such as particular consonantal articulations and urban progressive markers). This corroborates the perpetual transmutation of these vernaculars under the impetus of metropolitan norms and pedagogy. Moreover, the research probes affective phenomena like perceived linguistic deficiency and hyper-standardization. Intersecting demographics—such as young, educated urban women in Karbala gravitating toward Baghdadi prestige forms, and middle-aged, educated men in Karbala exhibiting over-adherence to quasi-Modern Standard Arabic norms—instantiate paradigms of excessive prestige form appropriation. These paradigms manifest differently across the two cities, betraying disparate local hierarchies and aspirational linguistic targets. By foregrounding these evolutionary developments rather than offering a purely synchronic snapshot, this work delineates the trajectories of linguistic change as they are molded by imbricated social identities and psychosocial exigencies.
Keywords: Iraqi Arabic, Sociolinguistics, Apparent-Time Change, Intersectionality, Linguistic Insecurity, Hypercorrection, Dialectology.

1. Introduction

Vernaculars are not insular constructs; rather, they are mutable sociocultural artifacts, in perpetual flux, mirroring the societal matrices and identities of their users. The Arabic vernaculars of Iraq present a particularly fecund domain for scrutinizing these dynamics, especially in light of the profound sociopolitical and demographic upheavals the nation has endured over recent decades. This investigation centers on two pivotal Iraqi metropolises: Baghdad, the national nexus and primary urban agglomeration, and Karbala, a city of profound sacral and cultural import. The juxtaposition of these localities affords a singular vantage point from which to inspect how dialects chart divergent evolutionary trajectories within urban milieus

possessing disparate social, political, and cultural lineaments. Baghdad, as a locus of modernity and governmental authority, frequently serves as a progenitor of linguistic innovation, whereas Karbala, celebrated for its devotional heritage, has historically preserved more static linguistic conventions. This inquiry delves into the stratification of linguistic variance across social echelons to illuminate temporal change as it unfolds. We leverage the apparent-time paradigm, a methodology that furnishes an analytic aperture into language evolution by juxtaposing the speech of disparate age cohorts at a singular temporal juncture. This approach permits us to posit the trajectory of linguistic development by apprehending a synchronic cross-section of Iraqi Arabic in a state of transmutation. Furthermore, an intersectional framework is employed, predicated on the acknowledgment that social categorizations such as age, gender, educational attainment, and locality are not monolithic variables. Instead, they coalesce to forge particularized social locations that modulate linguistic performance. A central problematic of this research is the interrogation of paradigms indicative of perceived linguistic inadequacy—a community's apprehension regarding its own idiolect—and its behavioral corollary, hyper-standardization, wherein speakers excessively adopt a feature deemed socially superordinate. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How does an apparent-time analysis of phonological and syntactic variables across different intersectional identities reveal patterns of diachronic linguistic change in Baghdad and Karbala?
2. To what extent do specific intersectional groups display linguistic patterns suggestive of linguistic insecurity or hypercorrection, and how does this vary between the two cities?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the complex interplay between social identity, prestige, and language change in urban Iraqi Arabic.

2. Literature Review

This study is grounded in several key areas of sociolinguistic inquiry: variationist theory, intersectionality, the study of linguistic insecurity in diglossic contexts, and the specific sociolinguistic landscape of Iraq.

2.1. Variation, Change, and Apparent Time

The field of variationist sociolinguistics, whose genesis lies with William Labov (1966, 1972), elucidated that linguistic variability is not stochastic but is, in fact, methodically configured and co-variant with the social attributes of interlocutors. A principal axiom of this methodology is the apparent-time hypothesis, which contends that contemporaneous variation across age strata can be construed as longitudinal change in motion. This construct presumes that older interlocutors generally preserve antecedent linguistic forms, while younger cohorts manifest emergent innovations (Bailey, 2002). By juxtaposing age-differentiated cohorts at a singular temporal point, investigators can extrapolate the evolutionary vector of a language, thereby obviating the necessity for protracted longitudinal inquiries.

2.2. Intersectionality in Sociolinguistics

Nascent sociolinguistic inquiry often treated social classifications like class, gender, and age as discrete, independent variables. In contrast, intersectionality, a theoretical framework with origins in critical race theory (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), posits that such identity facets are reciprocally formative and forge distinctive, lived realities. Within sociolinguistics, this perspective acknowledges that linguistic style is an artifact of this intricate interplay (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). As an illustration, the linguistic performance of a young, educated, urban woman may diverge substantively not only from her male counterparts but also from women of different educational, chronological, or

geographical provenances. An intersectional lens thus affords a more granular comprehension of how linguistic practices are inscribed upon real, complex social positionalities.

2.3. Linguistic Insecurity and Diglossia in Arabic

Sociopsychological dynamics are pivotal catalysts for language evolution. The concept of linguistic insecurity denotes a speaker's pejorative self-appraisal of their own speech variety when measured against a putative standard or valorized norm (Labov, 1972). This apprehension can impel idiolectal adjustment, which frequently materializes as hypercorrection—a phenomenon wherein speakers hyper-extend a perceived prestige convention, at times generating forms extraneous to the prestige group's own usage (Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1974).

These phenomena are particularly acute in the Arabic-speaking world due to the condition of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959): the concurrence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) as the superordinate (H) variety and colloquial vernaculars (Ammiyyah) as the subordinate (L) varieties. MSA, along with certain metropolitan dialects, often possesses acknowledged cachet (Haeri, 2003; Holes, 2004). This can engender feelings of linguistic inadequacy among speakers of non-prestige vernaculars and motivate a gravitation toward forms deemed more canonical or socially elevated (Bassiouney, 2009).

2.4. The Iraqi Sociolinguistic Context

Iraq's tumultuous historical arc has fundamentally molded its linguistic terrain (Collin, 2009). Haim Blanc's (1964) germinal research on the communal dialects of Baghdad provided an initial cartography of this diversity. More recent scholarship has chronicled phonemic convergence and transformation in various Iraqi vernaculars, often co-varying with gender, age, educational attainment, and amplified inter-dialectal contact (e.g., Mohammed, 2018, on Hīti Arabic; Ahmed, 2018, on Mosuli Arabic). Urbanization acts as a potent catalyst for dialectal leveling across the Arab world (Miller, 2007), and the ascendant influence of Baghdad's dialect epitomizes this tendency within Iraq (Leitner, 2021).

Gender represents another crucial vector of analysis, as societal norms and power asymmetries differentially affect the linguistic repertoires of men and women (Jaber, 2022). For example, the adoption of prestige forms by women can be a mechanism for negotiating evolving societal roles and ambitions (Jones-Gailani, 2019). The role of education is also of utmost consequence, as exposure to MSA and engagement in formal sectors frequently correlate with the deployment of more standardized variants (Azizah et al., 2024; Boudelaa & Marslen-Wilson, 2012). Nevertheless, the phenomena of linguistic insecurity and hypercorrection within particular intersectional communities in major Iraqi cities like Baghdad and Karbala remain insufficiently scrutinized.

3. Methodology

This inquiry utilizes a hybrid methodological schema, specifically a non-experimental, correlational research design. This framework conjoins the quantitative analysis of linguistic variable frequencies with a hermeneutic appraisal of their deployment in a social context (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The design is well-suited for probing co-variations between antecedent social attributes and unsolicited verbal conduct without recourse to experimental manipulation (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.1. Participants

A cohort of 192 native speakers of Iraqi Arabic was enlisted, comprising 96 interlocutors from Baghdad and 96 from Karbala. The sample was purposefully demarcated to permit a vigorous intersectional exegesis. Interlocutors were apportioned into four age strata: 15–25, 26–35, 36–45, and over 45 years (n=48 per

stratum). The sample was equally partitioned by gender (96 males, 96 females). Concerning education, participants were classified as 'educated' (possessing or pursuing tertiary/technical education) or 'uneducated' (with minimal or no formal schooling), with 96 participants per classification. Finally, interlocutors from each metropolis were sourced from both 'urban' (city core) and 'rural' (suburban or peripheral districts) locales, with 48 individuals from each location type per city. This stratified schema ensures that intersectional positionalities are robustly represented, enabling a meticulous examination of their mapping onto linguistic configurations (Milroy & Gordon, 2003).

3.2. Data Collection

Data were procured via sociolinguistic interviews engineered to elicit spontaneous, vernacular locutions and to mitigate the effect of the "observer's paradox" (Labov, 1972). These interviews transpired in informal, relaxed milieus (e.g., participants' residences) and encompassed an array of conversational themes related to personal histories, recollections, and perspectives. The study's linguistic objectives were not divulged to the interlocutors in order to preclude guarded linguistic adjustments (Wolfram & Schilling, 2016). All interviews were audio-recorded following informed consent, yielding 20-45 minutes of speech from each participant. Fieldworkers prioritized establishing collegial trust to foster a natural, conversational modality (Tagliamonte, 2006).

3.3. Data Analysis

The analysis proceeded through a methodical sequence. Initially, germane segments of the audio data were rendered into phonetic script by philologists trained in Iraqi Arabic phonetics, employing the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). An a priori inventory of phonological and syntactic variables was subsequently catalogued. Phonological variables encompassed the variants of /dʒ/ ([dʒ], [ʒ], [j]), /k/ ([k], [tʃ]), and the short vowel /i/ ([i], [u]) in designated lexical items. Syntactic variables included progressive aspectual markers (da- vs. dʒai-) and negation particles (ma- vs. mei-). For quantitative treatment, variant frequencies were computed for each speaker and aggregated across social classifications. Multi-factorial Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were deployed to assay the principal and interactive effects of the social variables (age, gender, education, city, location) on linguistic usage (Field, 2018). Subsequent comparative analyses (Tukey's HSD) were conducted for dyadic juxtapositions between specific intersectional cohorts to discern patterns of hypercorrection. These quantitative results were augmented by a qualitative exegesis of the speech data to probe the sociocultural valences and stylistic affordances of the variants.

4. Results and Analysis

The analysis revealed significant, socially stratified patterns of linguistic variation indicative of both diachronic change and sociopsychological pressures.

4.1. Apparent-Time Phonological Shifts

Two phonological variables clearly illustrate change in progress: the realization of historical /dʒ/ and /k/.

- **The /dʒ/ Variable ([dʒ] vs. [ʒ]/[j]):** Across both cities, younger speakers increasingly favored the [dʒ] realization, which is associated with urban and standardized pronunciation. An ANOVA confirmed a significant main effect for age on the use of [dʒ], $F(3, 188) = 6.72$, $p < .001$. The trend was led by young, educated, urban women, who consistently showed the highest adoption rates. A significant three-way interaction between age, education, and city ($F(3, 172) = 2.77$, $p < .05$) underscores that the pace of this change is moderated by the specific intersection of these social attributes.

- **The /k/ Variable ([k] vs. [tʃ]):** The palatalized affricate [tʃ] for /k/ is a feature of more traditional Iraqi speech. Our analysis showed a strong shift away from [tʃ] toward the urban, standard [k] among younger speakers. For example, an older, uneducated, rural male from Karbala might say, "*haadha al-[tʃ]alib maalatna*" ("This is our dog"), whereas a young, educated, urban female from Baghdad would almost exclusively use "*haadha al-[k]alib maalatna.*" This shift was statistically significant even in the most conservative groups, such as uneducated rural males, where the youngest cohort used [k] significantly more than the oldest ($\chi^2(1, N=48) = 12.54$, $p < .001$).

4.2. Apparent-Time Syntactic Shifts

In syntax, the choice of progressive aspect markers (da- vs. dʒai-) also demonstrated change. The particle da- is characteristic of Baghdad's urban prestige dialect, while dʒai- is more common in Karbala and rural areas.

Table 1: *Mean Frequency of da- Progressive Particle by Educated Males Across Age Groups*

City	Age Group	Mean Frequency of da-
Baghdad	15-25	92
Baghdad	25-35	85
Baghdad	Over 45	68
Karbala	15-25	63
Karbala	25-35	48
Karbala	Over 45	22

An ANOVA revealed significant main effects for age ($F(3, 92) = 11.45$, $p < .001$) and city ($F(1, 92) = 25.67$, $p < .001$), as well as a significant age-by-city interaction ($F(3, 92) = 3.12$, $p < .05$). This shows that while younger men in both cities are increasingly using da-, the change is most dramatic in Karbala, where young men are rapidly adopting the Baghdadi form, indicating a process of dialect leveling toward the capital's norm.

4.3. Hypercorrection and Linguistic Insecurity

The study identified clear instances of hypercorrection, particularly among aspirational groups in Karbala.
- **Phonological Hypercorrection:** The realization of /i/ as [u] in prestige words like /kulshi/ ('everything') to [kulshi] is a feature of urban Baghdadi speech. Young (15-25), educated, urban females from Karbala used this [u] variant in 78% of cases. A post-hoc Tukey HSD test revealed this was significantly higher than its use by older (Over 45), educated, urban Baghdadi males (68%), a traditional prestige group (Mean Difference = 10.0%, 95% CI [2.5, 17.5], $p < .05$). This "crossover pattern," where the Karbala'i group's usage exceeds that of the Baghdad prestige group, is a classic indicator of hypercorrection driven by linguistic insecurity. An example from a 22-year-old educated Karbala'i woman illustrates this: "*w-Allāh āni ashūf al-w[u]ḍaʿ hassa k[u]llish ṣaʿub...*" ("By God, I see the sit[u]ation now is v[e]ry difficult...").
- **Syntactic Hyper-Standardization:** Middle-aged (35-45), educated, urban men in Karbala exhibited a different type of hypercorrection. This group, likely experiencing pressure to maintain social status, sometimes avoided common colloquial negations in favor of MSA forms. For instance, in casual conversation, a speaker from this group might respond to a question with the formal MSA construction, "*lā, lam arahu l-yawm*" ("No, I did not see him today"), instead of the typical vernacular, "*lā, mā shifta l-yawm.*" This hyper-standardization suggests an orientation toward the perceived "correctness" of the H-variety, MSA.

The nature of hypercorrection differed between the cities. In Karbala, it was directed toward adopting the Baghdadi dialect. In Baghdad, it was more often an orientation toward MSA, the ultimate H-variety.

5. Discussion

The outcomes of this inquiry evince multifaceted paradigms of linguistic transformation that are consonant with Iraq's transmuting sociopolitical milieu. The methodical stratification of linguistic features across age-differentiated cohorts lends substantial credence to the postulate of diachronic evolution as apprehended through the apparent-time construct (Labov, 1994; Bailey, 2002). Younger interlocutors are at the vanguard of assimilating urban prestige variants, a trajectory firmly embedded in the contemporary Iraqi reality of expanded educational access, accelerating urbanization, and pervasive media influence (Hashimi, 2013).

Crucially, these transmutations are modulated by imbricated social identities. The observation that young, educated, urban females frequently spearhead the adoption of innovative forms is congruent with global sociolinguistic patterns (Labov, 2001; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Within the Iraqi context, this phenomenon mirrors the evolving social functions and aspirations of women, for whom linguistic choices serve as a potent vehicle for enunciating identity and navigating fluid social terrains (Jaber, 2022; Jones-Gailani, 2019). The linguistic ascendancy of Baghdad, which is inducing a convergence of Karbala'i speech toward its norms, epitomizes processes of dialectal leveling centered on influential metropolitan hubs (Trudgill, 1974; Leitner, 2021).

The interrogation of linguistic insecurity and hypercorrection illuminates the intricate psychosocial dimensions of language deployment. The over-extension of the prestige [u] vowel by young Karbala'i women presents a canonical instance of hypercorrection impelled by a drive to amass the "linguistic capital" (Bourdieu, 1991) associated with the Baghdadi vernacular. Concurrently, the syntactic hyper-standardization exhibited by middle-aged Karbala'i men underscores that such apprehensions can be directed toward disparate linguistic exemplars—a prestige dialect versus the superordinate H-variety of MSA—contingent upon the specific intersectional cohort and its social ambitions. The divergence in how speakers from Karbala and Baghdad negotiate prestige reflects their discrete positionalities within Iraq's overarching linguistic hierarchy. The "linguistic marketplace" (Bourdieu, 1991) functions dissimilarly in the two cities, allocating divergent values to distinct linguistic features.

6. Ramifications and Significance

6.1. Theoretical Ramifications

This study furnishes robust corroboration for variationist tenets within an Iraqi Arabic context and showcases the analytic utility of the apparent-time hypothesis for modeling diachronic change in non-Occidental settings. It underscores the heuristic potency of an intersectional framework, demonstrating that linguistic configurations are most cogently explicated by contemplating the interplay of manifold social identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). Finally, it augments theoretical frameworks concerning linguistic insecurity and hypercorrection by illustrating how these phenomena materialize with divergent aspirational targets (a prestige vernacular versus a standard language) in a diglossic environment, contingent upon local prestige matrices.

6.2. Practical Ramifications

For glottodidactics, a comprehension of this systematic variation can inform more efficacious pedagogical approaches to Iraqi Arabic, equipping learners for authentic communicative encounters (Azizah et al., 2024). In the domain of Natural Language Processing, this granular sociolinguistic data is indispensable for architecting more resilient automated speech recognition and sentiment analysis algorithms for dialectal

Arabic (Duwairi, 2015). For media and communications, an awareness of the linguistic sensitivities and prestige markers pertinent to different Iraqi communities facilitates more effective and bespoke messaging.

6.3. Cultural and Sociolinguistic Ramifications

The research reiterates that dialect constitutes a potent emblem of social and regional identity in Iraq. As processes of dialectal convergence gather pace, the effacement of unique local dialectal features becomes a tangible risk. This inquiry contributes to the documentation and consciousness-raising essential for the preservation of linguistic patrimony (Leitner, 2021). Furthermore, the revealed linguistic patterns, particularly those pertaining to insecurity and prestige, offer an aperture onto macro-level societal dynamics such as social mobility, inter-communal relations, and the impress of historical events on collective identity (Chatelard, 2010).

7. Conclusion

Iraqi Arabic is not a static entity; it is a fluid system undergoing active reconfiguration by generational succession, educational attainment, and social aspirations. This investigation has shown that younger, urban, educated individuals, women in particular, are spearheading the adoption of prestige forms, signifying a continuing evolution toward urbanized and standardized norms. Concurrently, the manifestation of hypercorrection among other cohorts reveals that language change is as much a psycholinguistic phenomenon as it is a structural one, reflecting how speakers engage with the social valence of language to modulate their identities. Apprehending these patterns allows for an appreciation of the complex social labor that language performs. It also serves as a potent reminder that as vernaculars evolve under centralizing pressures, irreplaceable linguistic heterogeneity may be imperiled.

7.1. Limitations of the Inquiry

Notwithstanding its findings, this study is not without its constraints. The sample size, though stratified, may not fully encapsulate the entire spectrum of linguistic diversity within Baghdad and Karbala. The observer's paradox persists as a potential confounding variable, given that the researcher's presence could have influenced speech patterns. The employment of apparent-time data is an established but inferential methodology for deducing diachronic change; it cannot supplant real-time longitudinal data. Finally, our operationalization of linguistic insecurity was predicated upon a hermeneutic analysis of linguistic behavior (hypercorrection) rather than on direct psycholinguistic assessments of speaker attitudes.

7.2. Avenues for Future Inquiry

Subsequent research should extend the present findings. Longitudinal studies that track individuals across time would furnish direct empirical verification of language change. The geographical purview ought to be expanded to encompass other Iraqi cities and rural territories to construct a more holistic cartography of national trends. Attitudinal studies explicitly probing speakers' language ideologies would augment the behavioral data on prestige and insecurity. Finally, research into the influence of digital media on the idiolects of Iraqi youth is indispensable for comprehending contemporary linguistic trajectories (Nasiha et al., 2023).

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Biodata

Mustafa Talib Mutashar Jabbri Academic Rank: Instructor Field of study: Linguistics _ Sociolinguistics Qualifications: B.A. Karbala, 2012, Iraq M.A. Applied Linguistics, Thi-Qar 2014, Iraq Teaching English Language, especially conversation, reading comprehension, Linguistics, Grammar undergraduate at Karbala University

Bahram Hadian teaches in the Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Isfahan, Isfahan Branch, Isfahan, Iran. Bahran Hadain is an Assistant Professor of Linguistics and has taught courses of variegated character, including linguistics and translation courses. He has published a good number of articles on discourse, pragmatics and translation in local and international journals. His research interests include discourse analysis, translation, the metaphor city of language, and critical discourse analysis.

Raad Shakir Abdul-Hassan Al-Nawas

Academic Rank: Professor Field of Study: Linguistics – Sociolinguistics Qualifications: B. A. Basra, 1979, Iraq, M. A. Applied Linguistics, 1984, Essex, UK, Ph. D. Sociolinguistics, 1989, Leeds, UK Teaching English Linguistics, especially Phonetics, Phonology, Applied Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, undergraduate as well as postgraduate studies (M A & Ph D) levels Postgraduate studies supervision: M.A. and Ph. D

Mehdi Vaez-Dalili is an Assistant Professor of TEFL in the Department of English at Azad University of Isfahan (Khorasgan), Isfahan, Iran. His research interests include Second Language Acquisition, Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) and corpus linguistics. His books include News & Media (2004, a collaborative work), News & Views (2010), Learn English News through Videos (2011), and English News Made Simple (2013). He has also published papers in local and international journals