

# A Sociolinguistic Approach to Language Variation in Iraqi Arabic Contexts

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## Abstract

This study is a sociolinguistic one. It investigates language variation in Iraqi context. It gives an account of language variation as a concept then it gives a brief explanation of its types. The current study gives a description of the social and regional differences in Iraqi language then Maslawi dialect, Baghdadi dialect and Najafi dialect are taken to clarify the regional differences in Iraq. The study is divided into three sections: Section one presents an introduction (problem of the study, aims, value and procedures). Section two presents a theoretical background of language variation, dialect, social and regional variation the standard language is explained. Section three gives an account of language variation in with focusing on regional and social variations. Finally, conclusions are presented.

## Keywords

Language Variation, Language and dialect, Regional Variation, Social Variation and Iraqi dialects.

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## Introduction

### 1.1 The Problem of the Study

Since this study is a sociolinguistic one, it is very important to refer to sociolinguistics as a field. Sociolinguistics is that field of linguistics that deals with the relationship between language and social factors such as educational level, age, gender and so on (Richards and Schmidt,2010:537).

This study deals with language variation in Iraq. Language variation deals with differences that have social significance, as speech behaviour of some social groups (communities).

The study presents many expressions that are used differently in Iraq. It focuses on the regional and social variation in Iraq.

## 1.2 Aims of the study

The current study aims at:

1. Showing the concept of language variation.
2. Shedding light on the difference between north, middle and south of Iraq,

## 1.3 Limits of the study

The present study is limited to studying language variation in Iraq (north, middle and south). It is limited to studying regional and social variation.

## 1.4 The Value of the study

The study is expected to be of value to every student who studies English as a foreign language. It is of a crucial value for those who are interested in sociolinguistics.

## 1.5 The Procedures

The procedures of the study are:

1. Collecting data about language variation from linguistic resources.
2. Putting these data in tables to organize it.
3. After presenting a background of language variation, its forms are revealed.
4. Collecting data from north of Iraq (Mosul), middle (Baghdad) and south (Najaf)
5. Giving the findings and conclusions.

## Language Variation

### 2.1 Language Variation

Many researchers state that language variation study is central to the solution of essential problems in linguistic theory (Bailey:1973) and (Labov: 2001). Variation can facilitate distinction among individuals, regional or social groups and nations. Variety can be noticed everywhere in language; it can be noticed at all levels; in different dialects and different registers. In the past linguistic tradition grammar was assumed to be a fixed, unchanging system. However, different writers and speakers use this system differently.

Many scientists recognize that language variation deals with differences that have social significance, as speech behaviour of some social groups (communities).

Wolfram (2006:205) states that "in traditional linguistic description the notion of variation within structural units has often been analysed as "free fluctuation," "optional rules," and "free variants" .

Crystal (2003: 189) explains what is meant by 'linguistic variable'. Linguistic variable can be defined as "a structural unit that includes a set of fluctuating variants showing meaningful co-variation with an independent set of variables".

The linguistic variation was firstly introduced by William Labov (1966), who is considered as a founder of language variation studies. The researchers have adapted his methodological innovations to show how language varies according to social factors (speaker's gender, ethnic group, age), how it is affected by regional and social dialects (certain local community or social group) or by register (particular context of use).

## 2.2 Language and Dialect

There is no universal criterion for distinguishing two different languages from two dialects (i.e. varieties) of the same language. The distinction between dialect and language is somehow arbitrary. In other words, it depends on the user's preference. For example, there is a discussion concerning whether or not the Limón Creole English must be considered "a kind" of English or it is a different language (Tomasz,2016:189).

Dialects can be regional or social. It is identified by certain set of words and grammatical structures. Thus, spoken dialects are associated with a distinctive pronunciation, or accent. Any language that has large number of speakers can develop dialects, particularly if there are geographical barriers which separates the groups from each other, or if there are social levels. One dialect may be considered as official or standard form of the language, and it is the variety that may be written down later. The difference between 'dialect' and 'language' seems obvious: dialects are considered as subdivisions of languages (Crystal,2008:142).

It is known that people speak different languages when they do not understand each other. But the 'dialects' of Chinese "Mandarin and Cantonese, are mutually unintelligible in their spoken form. They do not share the same written language, which is the main reason why one talks of them as 'dialects of Chinese". In opposite to Swedes, Norwegians and Danes who are able to understand each other, "but their separate histories, cultures, literatures and political structures warrant Swedish, Norwegian and Danish being referred to as different languages". (ibid:143).

Trask (2007:72) adds "Informally, we often reserve the label dialect for a speech variety which is noticeably different from our own, or which is lacking in prestige, but this is not the way the term is used in linguistics". In British, dialect includes only features of grammar and vocabulary, while features of pronunciation are treated under the quite different heading of accent. In American, an accent is usually considered to be just one part of a dialect. It is very important to know that everybody speaks some dialect or other. In other words, it is not possible to speak a language without using some dialect. "In fact, you might say that dialects exist but language is merely an abstract term for a collection of dialects".

### 2.3 Regional Variation

Since the nineteenth century, sociologists in Europe and the United States (and, on a smaller scale, in Britain) have been studying the regional distribution of some linguistic items, like the pairs of synonymous words "for example, pail versus bucket, or different pronunciations of the same word, such as farm with or without the /r/. Their results are plotted on a map, showing which items were found in which villages (since dialect geography tends to concentrate on rural areas to avoid the complexities of towns)". The sociolinguists draw a "line between the area where one item was found and areas where others were found, showing a boundary for each area called an ISOGLOSS (from Greek iso- same and gloss- tongue" (Hudson,2001:56).

Crystal (2008:143) defines regional dialects as those "dialects which identify where a person is from"

Every language that is spoken over any significant area is spoken in somewhat different forms in different places; these are its regional dialects. The study of regional dialects or dialect geography or dialectology, is a major part of linguistics since the late nineteenth century. There are many studies deal with regional variation which resulting in the publication of dialect atlases that containing a series of dialect maps, each showing the variation in respect of a single feature (the lines which separate features on the map are known as isoglosses) (Trask,2007:72).

### 2.4 Social Variation

SOCIAL DIALECTS, or SOCIOLECTS, refer to non-regional differences. Social dialects mean that "a speaker may be more similar in language to people from the same social group in a different area than to people from a different social group in the same area" (Hudson,2001:42).

One characteristic of the hierarchical social structure of any country like Britain is that "social class takes precedence over geography as a determinant of speech, so that there is far more geographical variation among people in the lower social classes than there is amongst those at the 'top' of the social heap. This has gone so far that people who have passed through the public school system (or would like to sound as though they had) typically have no regional traits at all in their language" (ibid).

As a matter of fact, even in a single group or community, the language may be spoken in different way by its members. These differences are social dialects or sociolects. For example, the English of London is different from the English of Birmingham, Liverpool, Glasgow, New York, New Orleans or Sydney, and even within London stockbrokers tend not speak like motor mechanics (Trask,2007:73).

Crystal (2008:143) defines social dialects as what identify where a person is in terms of social scale. Recently, the term sociolect has been used for this concept. Some languages are affected by social divisions, such as class, age, gender and professional status.

## 2.5 Standard Language

The only kind of variety which can be counted as a 'proper language' is a standard language. Standard languages are interesting in as much as they have a rather special relation to society - one which is quite abnormal when seen against the context of the tens (or hundreds?) of thousands of years during which language has been used. Whereas one thinks of normal language development as taking place in a rather haphazard way, largely below the threshold of consciousness of the speakers, standard languages are the result of a direct and deliberate intervention by society. This intervention, called 'standardisation', produces a standard language where before there were just 'dialects' (in the second sense, i.e. non-standard varieties) (Hudson,2001:32).

Wardhaugh (2010:31) refers to a process called Standardization. Standardization is the process by which a language is codified in some way. It involves the development of grammars, spelling books, and dictionaries, and possibly a literature. Specific items or events can be associated with standardization, like "Wycliffe's and Luther's translations of the Bible into English and German, respectively, Caxton's establishment of printing in England, and Dr Johnson's dictionary of English published in 1755".

Standard language is actually an idealized variety since it has no specific region. It is that variety which is associated with educational centers, administrative and commercial regardless of region. Standard English,

is "the version that we believe is found in printed English in newspapers and books, is widely used in the mass media and is taught in most schools". It is the variety that is used in teaching those who like to learn English as a second or foreign language. It is associated with education and broadcasting in public contexts and it is described in terms of the written language (i.e. vocabulary, spelling, grammar) than the spoken language. If we are thinking of that general variety used in public broadcasting in the United States, we can refer more specifically to Standard American English or, in Britain, to Standard British English. In other parts of the world, we can talk about other recognized varieties such as Standard Australian English, Standard Canadian English or Standard Indian English

## Language Variation in Iraq

### 3.1 Iraqi Arabic Language

Iraqi Arabic language is various. Its difference is affected by regional, social and other aspects in the following section the researcher will focus on regional and social aspects. The Iraqi dialects that are mentioned in this research are Maslawi dialect which is known by its tendency to use (ق,غ) in most of its expressions, Najafi dialect which is close to rural dialect and Baghdadi dialect which is various according to its areas.

### 3.2 Regional Variation

Every language that is spoken over any significant area is spoken in somewhat different forms in different places; these are its regional dialects. As mentioned previously, regional variation is based on the geographical distribution. Thus, the Iraqi language in north of Iraq is different from that of the middle and south and the most famous example of regional variation is (ajal) which is used in Salah-addin, (la'ad) in Baghdad and (cha) in south of Iraq. The following sentences show the regional variation in Iraq:

1. Khali nitla'a min eluji (Maslawi dialect)
- Khali nitla'a min elfare'a (Baghdadi dialect)
- Khali nitla'a min el-darbuna
- Khli nitla'a min el-agid (Najafi dialect)

The words (uji, fare'a, darbuna, egid) refer to one meaning that can be translated into English as (street). In Mosul, people say (uji), in Baghdad, they say (fare'a) and in the south of Iraq represented by Al Najaf, they say (darbuna, egid). So one can notice the great difference between these words.

2. Ghi7to salamto a'ala sta (Maslawi dialect)
- Ri7t salamt a'ala bibi (Baghdadi dialect)
- Ri7t salamt a'ala habubti (Najafi dialect)

The words (sta, bibi, habubti) refer to one meaning that can be translated into English as (grandmother). In Mosul, people say (sta<sup>l</sup>), in Baghdad, they say (bibi) and in the south of Iraq represented by Al Najaf, they say (habubti). So one can notice the great difference between these words which they refer to same meaning. One can notice that the first two words in Maslawi dialect are different in their pronunciation also.

Elbeha ghisalto el-ma7fugha.

El-bar7a ghisalit ezulea

Elbar7a ghisalit elbsat

Elbar7a ghisalit el-gleja

The words (ma7fugha, zulea, bsat,gleja) refer to one meaning that can be translated into English as (carpet). In Mosul, people say (ma7fugha), in Baghdad, they say (zulea) and in the south of Iraq represented by Al Najaf, they say (bsat, gleja). So one can notice the great difference between these words.

4. Ateto elakil lijej.

Nitaet el-akil lidijaj

Nawashit el-akil lidjaj

The words (ateto, nitaet, nawashit) refer to one meaning that can be translated into English as (I give). In Mosul, people say (ateto), in Baghdad, they say (nitaet) and in the south of Iraq represented by Al Najaf, they say (nawashit).

### 3.3 Social Variation

As a matter of fact, there is a difference between men and women's use of language (gender), old and young (age), literate and illiterate (education). Concerning age, old people tend to use old language or rural language, they rarely use the new expressions that are added to language recently. In other words, they usually do not apply language change in their use of language.

Young people on the other hand tend to use new expressions and their language is always changeable and developed. They tend to use some English words in their speech like (Ok, really, very good, thank you) and they are affected by social media in using certain expressions like (w khada)

Concerning gender, in their everyday conversations, men tend to use some expressions that belong to machines while women tend to talk about beauty and clothing. Women tend to use some words which are not used by men as (cute, ekhabul, yejanin, 7abet (which means amazing.

Literate people tend to use more standard language (rubama, qad (and English words ( I think, great, fantastic) in some contexts, in opposite to illiterate who use everyday language in whole situations.

## Conclusions

The study has reached the following conclusions:

1. Language variation deals with differences that have social significance, as speech behaviour of some social groups (communities).
2. Any language that has large number of speakers can develop dialects, particularly if there are geographical barriers which separates the groups from each other, or if there are social levels.
3. Every language that is spoken over any significant area is spoken in somewhat different forms in different places; these are its regional dialects.
4. Social dialects mean that "a speaker may be more similar in language to people from the same social group in a different area than to people from a different social group in the same area"
5. The Iraqi language in north of Iraq is different from that of the middle and south.

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