

**Here the Inherent Variability Hypothesis Stops:
A Critique With Reference to Damascus Arabic Dialects**

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1. Introduction

The variable paradigm, which was originally proposed by William Labov (1966, 1972a) to counter many theoretical claims of the Chomskyan school of linguistics (see Jassem 1994a: Ch.2 for an overview), is perhaps one of the most widely researched of all contemporary sociolinguistic theories (see Figueroa 1994). I shall briefly discuss some of its main principles here and give a critical evaluation thereof.

The term variable is central to linguistic analysis. According to Labov, a variable is defined as different ways of saying the same thing: ie, the lexical meaning is the same while the social meaning is different. For example, saying car with r and without still means the same. The linguistic variable, however, does not occur haphazardly and randomly; rather it obeys certain rules: of a social kind such as social class, age and sex; of a stylistic kind such as casual and careful styles; and of a linguistic kind such as the phonetic and grammatical context in which it occurs. The linguistic variable intersects with social and stylistic variables in different ways. A variable that shows both social and stylistic variation is called a sociolinguistic marker such as the variables (th) and (ng) in New York (Labov 1972) and Norwich (Trudgill 1974). In both cases, the social classes are stratified in the normal manner with the higher the social status, the greater the use of the standard and vice versa. The same thing applies to styles where the standard

language occurs with steadily increasing higher frequencies as the formality of the style increases. If the variable lacks stylistic variation but shows social variation, it is called an indicator such as the variable (O) in Norwich.

There are two central issues in the Labovian framework which have gone unchallenged by his followers although they are of very critical importance to the tenets of the theory itself. These are (i) the notion of inherent variability and (ii) the notion of proportion or relative frequency of occurrence. I shall explain these briefly.

Labov calls the alternation between the different forms (ie, the standard and vernacular) of the linguistic variable such as *r inherent variability* (Labov 1972a:223-225) in the sense that this is due to the intrinsic nature and properties of the linguistic system or dialect/variety itself. It is not due to dialect mixture (between the standard and the vernacular) or borrowing but is an intrinsic attribute of the system itself. As he puts it (1972a:225; 1972b:82), "variation ... is not the product of irregular dialect mixture, but an inherent regular property of the system". Trudgill adopted this definition verbatim when he stated that (1983:45),

Inherent variability means that the variation is not due to the mixture of two or more varieties but is an integral part of the variety itself.

But how can one be absolutely sure of that and discard dialect mixing altogether? A great deal of variation is not inherent and is actually due to dialect mixture as we shall see in our case study later. Even Trudgill (1983:45) himself invokes the idea of dialect mixture when discussing the variation in verbs without -s (eg, "he/she go") in Norwich and Detroit. Trudgill argued that the situation of these verbs might be the result of dialect mixture in the past where one dialect (eg,

standard English) had the feature "-s" and another (eg, Detroit Black English) lacked it with the result that Detroit Black English speakers mix both dialects together. The present situation, however, cannot be explained by dialect mixture; rather it is one of "inherent variability", which is supported by the fact that this variation occurs at a large scale, involving all speakers and a very large number of linguistic variables and is also, more tellingly, found in the speech of children.

Furthermore, Labov maintains that a variable is neither totally absent nor totally present in an individual's speech. This means that it occurs with different proportions and so its percentage in a given style may increase or decrease correspondingly. (We have to remember that Labov does not specify the minimal and maximal limits of variation. Does 1% constitute sufficient variation?) Thus all variants of a particular variable are simultaneously employed in a given style. For example, for the hypothetical variable (A) with its variants [a & b] to be called a variable, both should occur in any chunk of speech, though with different proportions, of course, such as [a] = 25% while [b] = 75%. If they do not or if only one occurs 100% of the time, then they cannot be said to be involved in variation; they must be involved in something else.

Take the the variable (th) as in *thing*, which in New York City speech may have two variants [t] and [th]. So people can pronounce it as *thing* or *ting*. In actual reality, speakers may be one of three:

- a) Those who say *thing* all the time.
- b) Those who say *ting* all the time.
- c) Those who alternate *thing and ting*.

As far as variation is concerned, only c) meets the definition whereas a) and b) do not since either the standard or the vernacular is used. In other words,

variation is restricted to c) in which the standard varies with the vernacular whereas variation is lacking in the other two altogether.

Now the Labovian framework accounts for c) but not for a) and b). The literature is replete with examples which fall under a) and b) about which Labov and his followers are silent for no obvious reasons. Here are a few such examples.

1. In Trudgill's (1974) analysis of Norwich English, there are many instances of a) and b). Take the variable (ng) by class and style (p.98). You find that in WLS the MMC and LMC use the standard 100%; in RPS the MMC use the standard 100%; in FS the LWC and MMC have very slight variation in their speech. And in CS the LWC use the vernacular 100%. Thus variability does not occur everywhere and even when it does, it is slight in a great many cases.

Table 1. Non-RP Forms for (ng) by Style and Class in Norwich

	WLS	RPS	FS	CS
MMC	000	000	003	028
LMC	000	010	015	042
UWC	005	015	074	087
MWC	023	044	088	095
LWC	029	066	098	100

Source: Trudgill 1974:92, cited in Jassem 1993b:134.

We also notice the same phenomenon in the use of the variable (O) as in *top*. Here the women of the MMC and the LMC scored 0% and 1% respectively whereas the men of the MMC 1% and the LMC 11% (Trudgill 1983: 86). Grammatical variables also reflect the same tendencies. The usage of verbs without *-s* in Norwich is another example as is shown in Table 2 below in which the MMC and

LWC have no variation in their speech.

Table 2. Verbs without s in Norwich

MMC 0% LMC 2% UWC 70% MWC 87% LWC 97%

Source: Adapted from Trudgill 1983: 44, Table 4.

2. In Wolfram's (1969) analysis of Black speech in Detroit. The UMC, in their use of verbs without "-s", have no variation in their speech as they use the standard 99% of the time, as shown in table 3.

Table 3. Verbs without s in Detroit

UMC 1% LMC 10% UWC 57% LWC 71%

Source: Adapted from Trudgill 1983: 44, Table 4

Another example comes from the use of multiple negation by MC females as in the following table.

Table 4. Use of Multiple Negation in Detroit

	UMC	LMC	UWC	LWC
Male	6.3	32.4	40.0	90.1
Female	0.0	1.4	35.6	58.9

Source: Cited in Trudgill 1983:85

3. In Petyt's (1985) description of the dialect of West Yorkshire. Holmes (1992:152) remarked that: "In the West Yorkshire study, for example, one person

who belonged socially in the middle group (3) dropped every [h]. From a linguistic point of view they sounded as they came from a lower social group. Averaging may conceal considerable variation within the group". Holmes did not comment on the implications of this for inherent variation. If there is only one speaker, one can ignore it. But when this is consistent, it demands not only an explanation but constitutes a challenge to the claims of the theory. Actually there is more than one speaker like that as the range of scores below shows.

Table 5. % (and Range) of H-Dropping in West Yorkshire

I	II	III	IV	V
96	64	43	21	17
(81-100)	(7-100)	(2-100)	(0-86)	(0-80)

Adapted from Petyt: 1980:189 cited in Wardhaugh 1992:156 , Table 6.1-2

As you can see, the range of scores speak for themselves where 0 and 100 scores mean consistent absence and presence of the vernacular respectively. So there are those who use the standard all the time (Class IV & V) and there are those who use the vernacular all the time (Class I, II & III). In other words, many lack variation in their speech altogether.

4. In Montreal French, l-deletion is an interesting example which concerns the use of certain forms of the impersonal pronoun *il* by two social classes: the professionals and the WC. Again there was no variation in the speech of the WC (99.6-100% Vernacular) as to their categorical use of the vernacular forms of the (im)personal pronoun *il* as is shown in the following table.

Table 6. % l-Deletion in 2 Social Classes in Montreal French

	Professional	WC
il (impersonal)	89.8	99.6
il (personal)	71.6	100.00
elle	29.8	82

Source: Cited in Holmes 1992:157

5. In New York and Reading, the use of postvocalic *r* by class is as follows.

Table 7. Postvocalic r in Reading and New York

	1	2	3	4
NY	32	20	12	0
R	0	28	44	49

Source: Cited in Holmes 1992:155

Class 4 in New York realises *r* categorically while class 1 in Reading deletes it categorically. For both classes there is no variation between the standard and the vernacular.

In the rest of this paper, I shall present evidence that challenges the notions of inherent variability and relative frequency of occurrence from my case study which is outlined below.

2. Aspects of Language Use in Damascus Arabic Dialects

2.1 The Speech Community

These are all immigrants in Damascus City and its neighbourhood who originally came from the northern part of the Golan Heights after its seizure by the Israeli forces in the aftermath of the 6 Day War of June 1967. All of the population were, until 1967, rural dwellers and worked mainly in agriculture and animal husbandry. They were also illiterate as there were very few schools in their villages which were restricted to the elementary level, all of which opened in the 1950's. After their expulsion from their motherland, employment patterns changed drastically for most where they had to work, in the new environment, as labourers and in the domestic services although some continued to rear cattle. The better educational facilities in the capital and nearby areas were to the benefit of the immigrants. They started sending their school-age children to schools and after nearly 20 years, a new generation has arisen among the immigrants which cut its way through all the government positions and jobs in the country- a means for improving their socio-economic status. (For further detail see Jassem 1993a, b: Ch. 2.)

2.2 The Data

The data for the present study has been gathered over a three-month period from May through August 1985 and supported by later participant observation. It is drawn from a judgement sample of 38 Syrian Arabic-speaking Golan Heights immigrants known as al-FaDI (for more information see Jassem (1993a, b)). The informants were divided by sex (20M, 18F), age (Young and Old), education (non-educated, primary-educated, secondary-educated and university-educated), and area (rural and urban).

Speech data was obtained from natural conversations, reading and reciting. As

far as natural conversations were concerned, it was observed that the immigrants used different speech styles, depending on who they were talking with and/or the dialectal background of their addressees. So in order to capture intervernacular switching and variation between GFA and especially DA (see 2.3 below) and how the latter is acquired and employed by the immigrants, two techniques were used. The first is an immigrant-with-immigrant encounter, the aim of which was to elicit the type of speech that was usually used by the immigrants at their homes with their parents, wives, children, relatives, friends, and co-immigrants. In short, it is intended to capture the original immigrant dialect at best if possible: ie, language maintenance. This was very easy to get and presented no problems on the whole. The main investigator, being an immigrant himself, simply chatted with and recorded the speech of almost everyone of the 38 informants for about 30 minutes on average. The topics discussed were of the everyday type.

The second is an immigrant-with-local encounter, which was intended to investigate whether the immigrant informants would shift their speech away from their original dialect towards the local dialect of their addressees when conversing with them.

As for reading and reciting, these included administering a word list for literate speakers and a recitation test for the illiterate ones respectively. Both of these aimed at eliciting formal speech.

From the two conversational speech encounters, only two styles were isolated: an Immigrant-with-Immigrant Style (hereafter IIS) and Immigrant-with-Local Style (hereafter ILS). The former was based on the immigrant-with-immigrant encounter and was meant to see how far the original immigrant dialect is maintained, and whether the presence of an immigrant insider/addressee plays any

role in language maintenance. In other words, this style is designed to show the ways in which immigrants talk with one another away from the locals and outsiders.

The latter was founded on the immigrant-with-local encounter and was intended to show the extent and the scope of language shift which is carried away from the original immigrant dialect towards the recipient host dialect under the influence of local addressees. In other words, this style is intended to show whether the immigrants will shift their speech towards their local interlocutors when conversing with them without the participation of like immigrants.

As to reading styles, only two were defined: Word list style and Recitation style, both of which are referred to as reading style (RS) here.

2.3 The Linguistic Variables

In order to set these in perspective, a few words about the dialectal situation in Damascus are in order. There is linguistic contact between three varieties of Syrian Arabic, which are:

(i) the immigrants' mother dialect which they brought with them from the Golan Heights into the host community in Damascus or learnt from their parents in the case of children newly born in the new environment. This dialect in its original form will be called Golan FaDl Arabic (GFA);

(ii) the local dialect of the host area which they have learnt from the locals of Damascus City and the neighbouring towns and villages. This variety will be designated Damascus Arabic (DA); and

(iii) the standard variety of Arabic in which newscasters read news bulletins, teachers conduct their instruction and religious men deliver their sermons. This will

be named Standard Arabic (SA).

The immigrants utilise this three-dialect continuum variably in their speech. The first two dialects- GFA and DA- are spoken vernaculars which may converge with or diverge from the standard norms. In some cases there is total divergence between all three varieties while in other cases there is either a convergence between SA and DA or between SA and GFA.

The variables for this study were selected in such a way that each linguistic variable should clearly distinguish the three dialects involved: i.e., it should at least separate GFA from DA on the one hand or GFA from SA on the other. Eight linguistic variables have been selected this way. One variable separates all three varieties from one another. This is (q), a voiceless uvular plosive, which has three variants which are as follows:-

- a) /q/ is the standard form. E.g., /qa:l/ 'he said';
- b) /ʔ/, a voiceless glottal stop, occurs in DA vernacular. E.g., /ʔa:l/ 'he said';
- c) /g/, a voiced velar plosive, replaces the standard variant in the original GFA dialect. E.g., /ga:l/ 'he said'; sometimes /g/ passes into /j/, a voiced palatal affricate, occurring mainly before/after palatal or front vowels. E.g., /jarye/ (also /qarya, garye, and ʔarye/) 'village'.

Another four show a convergence between the standard and the immigrant dialect. An example of this is the variable (th), a voiceless interdental fricative, as in **thani** "second". In DA /th/ is pronounced as either /t/ as in /tani/ or /s/ as in /sanyeh/ "second".

There are three variables in which the standard and the local dialect converge. An example of this is (-K), the form for the suffixed second person feminine pronoun "you". It is realised as:

- a) /-k/ in SA and DA. E.g., /l(a/i)k(i)/ 'to you (feminine)'.
- b) /-c/, a voiceless palatal affricate, in GFA. E.g., /lic/ 'to you (feminine)'. (For a fuller picture see Jassem 1993a & b).

Only these three variables will be used in the discussion below. All other variables behave similarly.

2.4 Data Quantification

The percentage or frequency score technique was employed in calculating the data according to the mathematical formula:-

$$\text{Percentage score} = \frac{\text{Number of Occurrences of a Variant}}{\text{Total Number of a Variable}} \times 100$$

3. Results

3.1 Presentation and Description

The results presented below are based on the averaged scores of the above three linguistic variables in the speech of 28, 20-30 year-old immigrant respondents in three speech contexts. No analysis of the social variables will be made here as this has been fully handled in Jassem (1993a, b; 1994a). Table 1 shows the results obtained for (Q), (-K), and (th) regarding the acquisition or use of the local dialect.

Table 8. % DA Use for (Q), (-K) and (th) by Style

	1. /ʔ/	2. /-k/	3. /t-s/	All
IIS	(2556) 1.14	(130) 5.38	(607) 14.34	6.93
ILS	(1667) 50.80	(288) 99.36	(507) 67.54	72.30
RS	(420) 00.00	no data	(400) 00.00	00.00

Source: Adapted Jassem 1993a, b: Tables 7.4, 8.2, & 9.17

Table 8 shows that DA use is context-dependent in all variables for everyone of which it is favoured (categorically in /-k/ and predominantly in /t-s/) in ILS and disfavoured in IIS. In the latter style, local features are virtually non-existent especially for the first two variants although they go up to 14% in the third case. In RS, the local dialect is categorically absent.

Multi-dialectal contact can only be seen in the case of the variable (q) since it is only in this particular instance that the three varieties are all set off from one another regarding their phonetic realizations thereof. On (-K) and on (th) as well as on all other variables, the distinction is often bi-dimensional or bi-dialectal and so there is no need for giving the whole scores as this can be easily calculated from Table 8. Table 9 displays the percentages of multi-dialectal usage of the variable (q) by giving the scores for all its dialectal variants.

Table 9. % of Multi-dialectal Contact on (q) by Style

	1. IIS	2. ILS	3. RS
/q/	19.40	37.50	100.00
/ʔ/	01.14	50.80	-----
/g & j/	79.46	11.70	-----
No	(2556)	(1667)	(420)

Table 9 shows that the three varieties occur with differing frequencies, depending on style. In IIS DA hardly occurs, SA about 20%, and GFA 79%, which indicates a very high level of GFA retention. But in ILS the whole hierarchy is reversed with GFA rapidly decreasing and this amounts to about 10%, while both DA and SA steadily increasing with the former more favoured (a little over 50%) over the latter (around 37%). In RS, only [q] occurs.

3.2. Discussion of Results

Our data provides us with strong evidence on the two crucial points highlighted at the outset of this paper: inherent variability and relative frequency of occurrence.

First relative frequency of occurrence. There is no lectal variation between DA and GFA which means they do not vary with each other. Rather they are used in mutually exclusive contexts or styles: ie, separation. A good example of this is the variable (q) and the feminine pronoun (-k). The immigrants in general utilise the local vernacular forms exclusively in interactions with members of the local speech community; the immigrant forms with co-immigrants; and the standard form in reading and reciting. For this reason the standard and local features cannot be said to vary, alternate or occur with the immigrant forms in the same context. As we have seen in the above tables, these forms are either present or absent: ie, separation and exclusion and not variation and alternation. For instance, [q] is the only form used in RS; [-k] occurs in ILS 100% of the time. In short, variability is non-existent here.

Secondly, inherent variability versus dialect mixture. All variation in the immigrants' speech is the result of dialect mixture and nothing else. There are three dialects involved which came in touch with one another after 1967. The dialects are clearly geographically, socially and linguistically demarcated and distinguished from one another in the type of variant used for each linguistic variable such as (q).

In actual interactions whether between immigrants and immigrants or immigrants and locals, Syrian Arabic variables are of two kinds: one kind shows that the local variants such as [ʔ & -k] do not occur alongside of the immigrant

variants at all. Each set occurs separately in their context of use. The other kind shows that the local variants can occur together with the immigrant forms in the same context such as [th-t-s] where [t & s] and [th]'s proportions of occurrence in IIS, for example, are 14% and 86% respectively. The latter kind may be taken as evidence on variability but that is not the case as it is not "inherent variability"; for what we have is dialect mixture which is the result of contact between GA and DA posterior to 1967.

Moreover, the inherent variability hypothesis fails to account for the causes that impel the immigrants to change and/or maintain their speech styles. This is one of its main drawbacks as it is mainly correlational in nature: ie, correlating variable, style and class, etc. When the immigrants change their speech with their listeners, there must be certain causes for this phenomenon to occur, which are of a linguistic and socio-psychological nature.

All this manifests the problems encountered with explaining the data in terms of the principles of the variable framework. The question to ask now: If variation is inadequate to the description of the above, what is it then that governs the use of, let us say, the local form of the morphophonemic variable in Syrian Arabic where it is nil in IIS and 100% in ILS? How can we account for this phenomenon? This is handled in the next section.

4. An Alternative Hypothesis: Adaptation

Syrian Arabic variables exhibit what may be called, initially, switching or shifting in view of the fact that the alternant forms do not occur together in the same style or conversation but rather in separate styles. However, it would be more appropriate to call it adaptation for a number of reasons that will be

explained below.

But first what does adaptation mean?

Adaptation is a linguistic and socio-psychological process which people use to fulfil their needs, improve their performance, augment and enhance their standing and expect to be rewarded. Principally people adapt many things, their speech being just one of them. It can be defined as the ability of an individual to change their speech style in such a way that suits their addressees and gain their approval.

Adaptation takes place in certain circumstances and under certain conditions. The circumstances are the factors that cause it to happen and the conditions are what may facilitate or impede it. As to the circumstantial factors, the immigrants adapt their speech to achieve the following objectives:

i) *Intelligibility*: The immigrants shift their styles to principally make their speech readily comprehensible to the others. Although dialects of the same language are usually assumed to be mutually intelligible, many speakers often complain about how difficult it is to understand a particular dialect, especially a remote one. There is some truth in that as intelligibility may vary along an ascending/descending scale. Geographically remote dialects (eg, London and Glasgow; Damascus and Casa Blanca) are less mutually intelligible than geographically closer ones (eg, London and Cambridge; Damascus and Cairo). In the present case study, the local and immigrant dialects were less mutually intelligible prior to 1967 where there was no contact between their speakers due to geographical distance, lack of communication and isolation. After 1967, mutual intelligibility increased due to the immigrants' physical presence in the local areas and their daily contacts with one another.

Moreover, some speakers may deliberately maximize/minimize the rate of the intelligibility of their talk. The question to ask now is: how can intelligibility be accomplished in such a situation? The easiest and simplest way would be to totally shift to the others' dialect and adopt it. This point has been corroborated by the speakers' own evaluations and responses. During data collection, I had asked every single one of them: "Do you change your speech with the locals? And why?" The younger group, almost all of them, opined that the locals "do not understand our speech". So talking like them is a sure way to make them understand. The older group did not think that their speech was unintelligible to the locals although they admitted of certain ambiguities sometimes. This might explain why they did not shift to the local dialect at all.

ii) *Identity*: speech plays an important role in establishing and asserting one's identity where people adopt the speech patterns of those with whom they desire to associate and identify themselves. Conversely language may be used in a way in which speakers dissociate and distance themselves from their listeners. In the Syrian Arabic case, examples of both types occurred. In IIS, the immigrants exhibited an immigrant identity expressible in the dominant use of GFA whereas in ILS they exhibited a local identity by shifting to their addressees' dialect. However, the situation was more complex in the latter style as there were two conflicting identities, both of which happened in a direction away from the immigrant identity. On the one hand, the secondary-educated (SE) group dissociated themselves from both the local and the immigrant identities; they preferred pan-national identity through the use of the standard variant [q]. On the other hand, the UE group have a local identity which is reflected in their preference of the local variant

[ʔ] (see Jassem 1993a, b: Ch. 7, Table 7.2).

Gender is an important factor as it intersects with identity. We can safely say that Syrian women identify themselves more than men with the new community and its dialect (see Jassem 1993a, b; 1994a). On all the variables investigated, the women used the local dialect more often than men. Maybe the reason is because women cannot resist social pressure in an alien environment and so they identify with it more quickly (for further detail, see Jassem 1993a, b: Chs. 7-9, 1994a).

iii) *Attitude*: Speakers change their speech styles to show a favourable or a disfavoured attitude towards the others including their language and customs and so on. In the case of those people who have a positive attitude, their shift will be maximal in order to increase intelligibility whilst in the case of those with negative attitudes there will be minimal shift which results in decreased intelligibility. This is the situation in Damascus where I asked my speakers the following question: "Do you like Damascus speech?".

The results obtained showed some immigrants liked it, some did not, and some neither liked nor disliked it. Those who had a positive attitude were the university- and primary-educated while those who had a negative attitude included the secondary-educated. And that is why they used the standard [q] instead of the local [ʔ] in ILS. The non-educated males were neutral in this respect. It is interesting to note that the females in general had a more positive attitude to the local culture and speech. Women do that out of their desire to be accepted by their neighbours and make friends with them as my wife told me (see v below).

iv) *Prevalence*: This means the dominance of one community and their

language over another in territorial, economic, educational and administrative terms. In general it can be said that immigrant communities are not dominant vis-a-vis settled populations who hold the reins of power, wield it and dictate matters over the others in nearly all walks of life. And in such circumstances the language of the weak loses ground day by day while the language of the dominant community wins over. And this is exactly what happened in Damascus especially in the first twenty years of the exodus.

v) *Social approval*: This means that attempt by the immigrants to win the local community's acceptance of their presence amidst them. They try to please them by using their styles of speaking; they try to appear as one of them without any difference whatsoever. This is a demand made by the locals of the immigrants. Although I have no evidence to prove this from my data, I can say that the locals would approve of those who speak like them more than of those who do not. But there is indirect evidence from intermarriages between local men and immigrant women. The latter abandon not only their immigrant speech but also habits and dress styles completely.

vi) *Social integration*: This is the attempt by the immigrants to integrate themselves into the local social structure by adopting their speech, style, and habits. The immigrants do not seem to have any grudges and fears about that at all as they say "we are one country, one people, and one religion". With this attitude, the local speech patterns will win over very soon. In actual reality, the observer of the younger generation of the immigrants in the local areas will find that there is almost nothing that can distinguish them from one another, whether in terms of

speech, dress, and so on. That is, these immigrants are completely "lost and molten". Yes, at least for some of them. And I have seen that with my very own eyes!

vii) *Immigration*: the natural and most fertile habitat for adaptation to occur is in immigrant populations who suddenly find themselves in a new area, in a new world in which they are cut off from their roots and homeland. In order to live in the new community and be successful, one needs to master their means of communication as fully as possible. In the Syrian case, no linguistic change at this huge rate would have been imagined, let alone happened, without immigration which has been precipitated by the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.

There are two conditions which must be met for adaptation to take place: (i) age and (ii) adequate exposure. As far as age is concerned, one must be young enough to acquire new speech patterns and consequently adapt. In general, younger groups adapt faster and more completely than older groups (see Jassem 1993a, b: Ch. 7, sec. 7.2 for a review). Or the younger the age, the greater the adaptation. In the Syrian Arabic case, two age groups were studied: a young group (20-30 years) and an old group (over 50 years). The results obtained on all 8 variables investigated showed that the old were unable to adapt to their local speakers whilst the young adapted, though this differed according to their level of education and gender (for further detail see Jassem 1993a, b: Chs. 7-9; 1994a).

As to adequate exposure, this involves that the immigrants should be exposed long enough so as to be able to adapt to the language of the new area. There are two types of exposure which can be overt and covert, parallels of which are found in open and closed social networks. Overt exposure can happen where physical

contact between different speakers is possible, for example, at work, in the street, at school whereas covert exposure may take place at home without mingling with the others directly. In my data, both types occurred. Most members of the young group had overt exposure except for some of the non-educated females who were still able to adapt through covert exposure. The illiterate young members were unable to adapt due to lack of exposure.

Finally a note on method. As adaptation contrasts sharply with variation, some technical terms are needed in the naming of linguistic forms. For example, variables and variants can be re-named **adaptables** and **adaptants** in view of their behaviour described above. So we can talk of **Adaptable (Q)** and its adaptants [q], [ʔ] and [g]. This way the adaptability hypothesis extends itself to all levels of analysis: linguistic, social, socio-psychological and stylistic or conversational.

5. Conclusion

This paper has critically questioned and refuted the adequacy of the variable hypothesis and the nature of variation to the analysis of Damascus Arabic. In Labov's work, variation is an inherent property of the system and not the result of dialect mixture, an issue which has been taken for granted in all variation studies (cf. Figueroa, 1994). Applying this concept to the analysis of Syrian Arabic yielded just the opposite results. In particular we found that variation is not inherent, rather it is a consequence of dialect mixture between three varieties of Arabic. Moreover, there are cases in which variation did not occur at all. And what we actually found was the speakers switching from one dialect or style to another: using SA in RS, DA in ILS, and GFA in IIS. The acquisition and use of DA can be said to be the best evidence on that last point. The speakers behaved that way for certain reasons, both linguistic and socio-psychological. To account for this, the

adaptability hypothesis has been proposed. Adaptation means the ability of an individual to change his/her speech to meet the linguistic needs of their audience or simply to suit their listener(s). Amongst these needs is the need to be intelligible, the need to integrate and assimilate oneself into the new community and so on. Not all individuals can adapt to the same extent, of course. Age, gender and attitude are important in this connection. Further testing of this model on other dialects and languages is needed.

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