

Social Attitudes Towards the Central Najdi Dialect Among Speakers of Other Najdi Dialects

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Abstract—This study examines the social attitudes towards the Central Najdi dialect among speakers of other Najdi dialects, i.e., Qassimi and Northern dialect. The Central dialect, spoken in the capital city of Riyadh, which has the largest population in the kingdom, is considered representative of Saudi Arabic. Based on the gravity model (Trudgill, 1974), it is hypothesized that other Najdi dialects will gravitate towards the dialect of Central Najd. The social attitudes towards the Central dialect will be assessed using the indirect method known as the verbal-guise test. The test measures individuals' implicit attitudes towards a dialect or a language. Participants listen to authentic short speech excerpts from each of the dialects under study and rate each speaker based on selected status and solidarity traits. Findings indicate that the Central Najdi dialect is perceived more favorably in terms of status traits such as being civilized, educated, and open-minded compared to Qassimi and Northern dialect.

Index Terms—Central Najdi, gravity model, Northern dialect, Qassim dialect social attitudes, verbal-guise technique

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Dialects Understudy

The linguistic varieties within Saudi Arabia exhibit a continuum resembling the dialects of neighboring countries. For example, southern Saudi Arabian dialects resemble those of Yemen, while eastern dialects share characteristics with those found in Bahrain and the other countries in the region (Holes, 1984, p. 30). Western dialects, particularly in the Hijaz region, demonstrate similarities to Egyptian and Levantine Arabic (Ingham, 1971, p. 277). However, Najdi dialects, spoken in the central region of Saudi Arabia, have remained more isolated and are therefore considered more conservative (Ingham, 1994, p. 1). These Najdi dialects are further classified into three groups: Central Najdi (Riyadh Province), Northern (northern Arabian Peninsula, Hayil, and Northern Borders Provinces), and mixed Northern-Central (Qassim Province), Ingham (1994, p. 5).

The most popular dialect in Saudi Arabia is the Najdi dialect, particularly the Central Najdi variety. This dialect is spoken in the capital city, Riyadh, and the surrounding areas, which makes it highly influential in the country (Al-Azraqi, 2007). The Central Najdi dialect is also the dialect associated with the Saudi royal family. Riyadh, being the political and administrative center of Saudi Arabia, is where the royal family resides and conducts much of their official business. As a result, Central Najdi dialect has a prominent status and is often heard in media, government communications, and formal occasions.

B. The Study and Research Questions

This study investigates the social attitudes of speakers of two Najdi dialects— the Qassimi and Northern dialect— towards the Central Najdi dialect. The Central Najdi dialect, spoken in Riyadh, not only serves as the linguistic norm for Saudi Arabic due to the city's demographic and political prominence but also embodies the cultural and social identity of the nation (Ingham, 1994; Prochazka, 1988).

The research builds on the gravity model proposed by Trudgill (1974), which suggests that linguistic features tend to diffuse from larger, more influential urban centers to smaller, less influential areas. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that the dialects of Qassim and Northern regions will show a linguistic shift towards the Central Najdi dialect. This hypothesis will be tested through the assessment of social attitudes using the verbal-guise test (discussed in details below), an adaptation of the matched-guise technique initially introduced by Lambert et al. (1960) and further developed by Cooper (1975) to measure implicit language attitudes.

Research Questions:

- What are the implicit social attitudes of Qassimi and Northern Najdi speakers towards the Central Najdi dialect?

This question aims to uncover whether speakers of other Najdi dialects hold positive or negative attitudes towards the Central Najdi dialect, which is seen as the prestigious form of Saudi Arabic.

- Do social attitudes towards the Central Najdi dialect vary significantly between Qassimi and Northern Najdi speakers?

This question examines whether the social perceptions of the Central Najdi dialect differ between the two groups of speakers, potentially indicating regional biases or varying degrees of influence.

- What status and solidarity traits are most strongly associated with the Central Najdi dialect among speakers of other Najdi dialects?

This question focuses on identifying the specific characteristics that speakers of Qassimi and Northern Najdi dialects attribute to the Central Najdi dialect, such as being civilized, educated, open-minded, confident, modest, sociable, and emotional.

These research questions aim to provide insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics within the Najdi dialects, contributing to a deeper understanding of language attitudes and their implications for dialect convergence in Saudi Arabia.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Before examining the language attitudes towards the Central Najdi dialect, it is essential to define language attitudes. Ferguson (1972) describes language attitudes as “elicitable shoulds on who speaks what, when, and how” (in Cooper & Fishman, 1974, p. 6). Cooper and Fishman (1974) provide a definition that focuses on the outcome of language attitudes, such as behavior toward a language. They define language attitude in terms of referents, which include “attitudes toward a language (e.g., Hebrew), a feature of a language (e.g., a given phonological variant), language use (e.g., the use of Hebrew for secular purposes), or language as a group marker (e.g., Hebrew as a language of Jews)” (Cooper & Fishman, 1974, p. 6). In this study, language attitudes are considered as attitudes towards a dialect, specifically the Central Najdi dialect.

As reviewed in Alajmi (2022), the relevance of language attitudes emerged from the work of Labov (1963). As noted by Cooper and Fishman (1974), language attitudes can influence sound change (Labov, 1963), define a particular speech community (Labov, 1966), affect second language achievement (Anisfeld et al., 1962; Lambert, 1967), and shape teachers' understanding of students' linguistic abilities (Seligman et al., 1972). Social attitudes to a dialect can explain how behavioral inputs potentially lead to behavioral outputs such as language/dialect change (Garrett, 2010).

Studies examining language attitudes often focus on communities where multiple languages are spoken, aiming to explore speakers' attitudes towards each language and their associated social traits and preferred uses. Examples of such studies include Bentahila (1983), Chakrani (2011), and González-Rivera (2021). Additionally, research has been conducted on language attitudes towards standard (high) and colloquial (low) varieties in diglossic communities, e.g., Brown et al. (1985), Dweik (1997), and Murad (2007).

However, when examining social attitudes to dialects that are all ranked at the same level of standard/colloquial, it might be challenging to predict the attitudes to each dialect. The results in these studies are sometimes unpredictable. Examples of such studies conducted in the Arab world include Al-Raba'a (2016) and Hussein and El-Ali (1989).

As reviewed in Alajmi (2022), Aldosaree (2016) explored social attitudes towards regional dialects Saudi Arabia, focusing on Central Najd, Western Hijaz, and Southern dialects. The study found that speakers of the Najdi dialect are perceived as friendly, kind, humble, and religious; Southern speakers are viewed as brave, kind, humble, religious, and respectful; and Hijazi speakers are considered creative, kind, neat, and respectful. Other studies exploring social attitudes towards particular dialects in Saudi Arabia include Alhazmi and Alfalig (2021) and Alabdali (2017).

Despite these efforts, there is no existing study that specifically explores social attitudes towards the Central Najdi dialect among speakers of other Najdi dialects.

As for gravity model, according to Britain (2005), the spread of linguistic changes across geographical regions is often referred to as urban hierarchical diffusion. However, Trudgill (1974) developed an intricate hierarchical model called “the gravity model”, which factors in distance, size, and linguistic similarity to help explain how linguistic features spread from London to other towns. Besides this type of diffusion, the diffusion of linguistic features can follow other geographical patterns: (1) wave model, where innovations move outward from a central area to nearby locations first; (2) contra hierarchical diffusion, where linguistic features spread from rural areas to towns and then cities, against the urban hierarchy; and (3) cultural diffusion, where a linguistic form establishes itself in one area before diffusion to other areas of the country.

According to Al-Rojaie (2013), in modern Arabic dialects, various sociolinguistic studies have shown that dialects spoken in major cities, especially capital cities, are becoming national or regional standards. These dialects influence the surrounding areas (e.g., Abd-el-Jawad, 1986; Abu-Haider, 1989). Typically, linguistic changes follow an urban hierarchy model, starting in large metropolitan centers and spreading to smaller towns before reaching rural and Bedouin dialects. However, this urban hierarchy model is not the only pattern observed in Arabic dialects. In some instances, established urban dialects have declined due to the influence of newly arrived groups from rural or Bedouin areas, driven by the political power and prestige of these newcomers (e.g., Abu-Haider, 1991; Holes, 1983, 1986).

III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Language attitude studies can employ either direct or indirect methods. Direct methods, such as surveys, interviews, and rating scales, ask participants to explicitly state their feelings towards a language or dialect. However, this approach can be problematic, as respondents might conceal their true feelings due to social desirability bias or unconscious prejudices (Preston, 2013). Additionally, many individuals are not consciously aware of the linguistic variables being studied (Labov, 1966), which can lead to inaccurate results. To address these issues, Lambert et al. (1960) developed the

Matched-Guise Technique, which indirectly elicits attitudes by having listeners evaluate speakers of different languages or dialects without knowing they are listening to the same bilingual individuals. This method reduces the effect of vocal characteristics as the stimuli are produced by the same speaker.

The Verbal-Guise Technique (VGT), introduced by Cooper (1975), is used when it is challenging to find speakers who can authentically produce stimuli in multiple dialects. In VGT, each stimulus is recorded by a native speaker of the respective dialect, ensuring the authenticity of the speech samples (Alajmi, 2022). However, this method introduces the potential influence of vocal qualities on listeners' judgments, as a speaker's voice may affect their ratings on certain traits.

The stimuli were produced by native speakers of each dialect under study (Central Najdi, Qassimi, and Northern Najdi). All efforts were made to ensure that the vocal characteristics of the speakers were not markedly different, thereby minimizing the influence of vocal quality on participants' ratings. The stimuli consisted of a short narrative incorporating the distinctive linguistic features of the dialects under examination.

The linguistic features of each dialect that were incorporated in the stimuli are mostly differences in the personal pronoun paradigms, both free and suffixed, between the three dialects. The pronouns lists, discussed extensively in Alajmi (2023), are as follows:

TABLE 1
INDEPENDENT PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN DIALECTS OF NAJD

Person.Number.gender	Central Najdi	Qassim	Northern
1SC	<i>ʔana:</i>	<i>ʔana:</i>	<i>ʔana:</i>
1PC	<i>inna</i>	<i>hinna</i>	<i>hinna</i>
2SM	<i>ʔint</i>	<i>ʔant</i>	<i>ʔant</i>
2SF	<i>ʔinti / ʔintaj</i>	<i>ʔinti</i>	<i>ʔinti</i>
2DC	--	--	--
2PM	<i>ʔintaw</i>	<i>ʔantu:</i>	<i>ʔantu:</i>
2PF			
3SM	<i>hu:</i>	<i>hu:</i>	<i>hu:</i>
3SF	<i>hi:</i>	<i>hi:</i>	<i>hi:</i>
3DC	--	--	--
3PM	<i>hum</i>	<i>hum</i>	<i>ham</i>
3PF		<i>hin</i>	<i>hin</i>

TABLE 2
DEPENDENT PERSONAL PRONOUNS IN DIALECTS OF NAJD

Person.Number.gender	Central Najd	Qassim	Northern
1SC	<i>-i:</i>	<i>-i:</i>	<i>-i:</i>
	<i>-ni/-a:ni</i>	<i>-an</i>	<i>-an</i>
1PC	<i>-na/-a:na</i>	<i>-na</i>	<i>-na</i>
2SM	<i>-ik/-k</i>	<i>-ik/-k</i>	<i>-ak</i>
2SF	<i>-s / -ik</i>	<i>-ts / -ik</i>	<i>-ts / -ik</i>
2DC	--	--	--
2PM	<i>-kum</i>	<i>-kum</i>	<i>-kam</i>
2PF		<i>-kin</i>	<i>-kin</i>
3SM	<i>-ah</i>	<i>-uh</i>	<i>-uh</i>
3SF	<i>-ha:</i>	<i>-ah</i>	<i>-ah</i>
3DC	--	--	--
3PM	<i>-hum</i>	<i>-hum</i>	<i>-ham</i>
3PF		<i>-hin</i>	<i>-hin</i>

A total of 30 participants took part in VGT, with 15 speakers each representing the Qassimi and Northern dialects. To control for potential confounding variables, all participants were male and in their twenties. This demographic uniformity helps isolate the effect of other social factors. A proposal for further studies might examine the social attitudes towards Central Najdi dialects across the social factors of age, gender, education and social network.

Participants listened to the stimuli and rated each speaker on a Likert scale (1-5) based on the following traits: civilized, educated, open-minded, confident, modest, sociable, and emotional. The presentation order of the stimuli was systematically varied every five speakers to mitigate any order effects, ensuring that the sequence in which the dialects were heard did not influence the ratings.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The data set of each group of participants yielded quite similar results across all dialects and most traits. The standard deviation (SD) is low for the majority of traits across dialects, except for modesty and emotionality.

The study's findings indicate that speakers of the Central Najdi dialect generally scored higher on status traits compared to speakers of Qassimi and Northern Najdi dialects. Specifically, Central Najdi speakers were rated higher in terms of being civilized, educated, and open-minded. However, there were no significant differences among the dialects regarding solidarity traits such as confidence, modesty, sociability, and emotionality. The results are provided in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
VGT RESULTS

Trait	Dialect	Mean	SD
Civilized	Central Najdi	4.5	0.6
	Qassimi	3.8	0.5
	Northern Najdi	3.6	0.8
Educated	Central Najdi	4.7	0.5
	Qassimi	4.0	0.7
	Northern Najdi	3.9	0.5
Open-minded	Central Najdi	4.6	0.6
	Qassimi	3.7	0.9
	Northern Najdi	3.5	0.8
Confidence	Central Najdi	3.9	0.6
	Qassimi	4.0	0.7
	Northern Najdi	3.8	0.6
Modesty	Central Najdi	3.2	1.4
	Qassimi	3.4	1.7
	Northern Najdi	2.8	2.1
Sociability	Central Najdi	3.8	0.7
	Qassimi	4.2	0.5
	Northern Najdi	4.5	1.1
Emotionality	Central Najdi	3.4	1.8
	Qassimi	3.7	2.3
	Northern Najdi	3.8	0.8

B. Discussion

The results suggest that the Central Najdi dialect is perceived as having higher status compared to Qassimi and Northern Najdi dialects. These findings align with the gravity model proposed by Trudgill (1974), which posits that linguistic change and prestige flow from larger, more influential urban centers to smaller, less influential areas. In this context, Riyadh, where the Central Najdi dialect is spoken, acts as a linguistic and cultural epicenter within Saudi Arabia.

According to the gravity model, the Central Najdi dialect's association with traits such as being civilized, educated, and open-minded can be attributed to Riyadh's status as the capital and its significant economic, political, and cultural influence. This gravitational pull attracts and shapes the linguistic perceptions of surrounding regions. As a result, the Central Najdi dialect is viewed more favorably in terms of status, reflecting the central role of Riyadh in the nation's sociolinguistic landscape.

The lack of significant differences in solidarity traits among the dialects indicates that while status perceptions may be influenced by the centrality of Riyadh, interpersonal qualities like confidence, modesty, sociability, and emotionality are more evenly distributed across the Najdi dialects. This finding suggests that regional dialects maintain unique social identities and interpersonal connections, independent of their perceived status.

It should be noted that Qassimi and Northern Dialect speakers are well-known for strong identity and pride of their heritage. The concept of language and identity is extensively discussed in sociolinguistic literature. Language is not just a means of communication but also a critical component of social identity (Edwards, 2009; Joseph, 2004). Fishman (1999) emphasized that language serves as a symbol of identity and group membership. In the context of Najd, Qassimi and Northern dialect represent more than a linguistic variety; it embodies their cultural and social heritage.

The strong identity associated with the two groups' dialect may explain why there were no significant differences in solidarity traits such as confidence, modesty, sociability, and emotionality among the Najdi dialects in this study. Despite the Central Najdi dialect being perceived as having higher status, the Qassimi and Northern dialect speakers' strong social identity and pride in their dialect likely contribute to their sense of solidarity and community. This aligns with the findings of Suleiman (2003), who highlighted that language pride and loyalty can lead to the preservation of linguistic traits and resist external influences.

The social cohesion and pride among the groups might also influence their language attitudes. According to Woolard (1998), language ideologies and attitudes are deeply rooted in social and cultural contexts. The positive attitudes towards their dialect and the strong sense of community likely reinforce their confidence and sociability, independent of the perceived status of the Central Najdi dialect. This is consistent with the idea that language attitudes are influenced by factors beyond mere linguistic prestige, encompassing broader social and cultural dimensions (Garrett, 2010).

Furthermore, the findings resonate with the gravity model proposed by Trudgill (1974). While the Central Najdi dialect is perceived as prestigious due to Riyadh's socio-political influence, the Qassimi and Northern dialect's social traits are maintained through strong regional identity and pride. This indicates that the gravitational pull of linguistic prestige from urban centers like Riyadh is moderated by local social dynamics and cultural identity.

The speakers' attitudes towards their own dialect and the Central Najdi dialect can be seen as an interplay between linguistic prestige and social identity. The Central Najdi dialect's association with status traits such as being civilized, educated, and open-minded reflects its prestige and influence. However, the lack of significant differences in solidarity traits suggests that the strong social bonds and identity among Qassimi and Northern speakers play a crucial role in maintaining their dialects' social traits. This is evident in the linguistic behavior of social media influencers observed in Alajmi (2023). For example, a social media influencer from the Qassim region might style-shift according to the social setting they are in. If they are advertising a newly released brand in the capital city of Riyadh, they tend to use a more koineized form of their dialect, using fewer marked features that are stereotypical of their region. Conversely, the same influencer tends to use a more localized version of their speech when they are in a friendly social gathering in the Qassim region. The same behavior is evident among Bedouin Central Najdi speakers who live in the towns surrounding Riyadh (Alajmi, 2019).

In general, these findings contribute to our understanding of language attitudes in Saudi Arabia and highlight the impact of urban centers on regional dialect perceptions. Future research could further explore the mechanisms behind these attitudes and examine how they evolve over time as urbanization and social mobility continue to shape the linguistic landscape of the country.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study provides valuable insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics within Najdi dialects in Saudi Arabia. The Central Najdi dialect, associated with Riyadh's economic, political, and cultural prominence, exerts a gravitational pull that influences linguistic perceptions across the region. While status attributes are more closely linked to the Central Najdi dialect, solidarity traits remain distinct across different Najdi varieties. Future research could explore longitudinal changes in language attitudes and the evolving role of urban centers in shaping regional dialect perceptions. It is predicted that the shift towards Central Najdi (Riyadh Dialect) is inevitable. However, the stronger the social network and identity of a society, the longer it will take to occur. A large population of Qassimis have settled in Riyadh for more than three generations. Their version of Qassimi dialect showcases the future shift. This is similar to what has been discussed in Alajmi (2019) as to whether Bedouins living in Al-Kharj (a city located 100 km south of Riyadh) will shift towards Riyadh dialect in the near future.

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