This article examines the use of modern standard Arabic (MSA) and Egyptian colloquial Arabic (ECA) in talk shows. I shed light on code-choice and code-switching by women in relation to identity.

Because of the diglossic situation in the Arabic speaking world, there is a difference between a ‘prestige variety’ and a ‘standard’ one. Many linguistic studies in the Arab world have shown that for most people there is a prestige vernacular, the identity of which depends on many geographical, political and social factors within each country. In Egypt, for example, for non-Cairenes it is Cairene. It is usually the urban dialect of the big cities. The standard language is modern standard Arabic (MSA), which is not the spoken vernacular of any country in the Arab world (cf. Holes 2004 for a discussion of diglossia).

Quantitative variation studies done on the Arab world all indicate the following, first that women sometimes do not have access to education and professional life to the same extent as men do and their use of MSA is less than men. On the other hand, when women have a choice between the prestigious urban variety, a rural variety and standard Arabic, they are more prone to choose the urban variety as a symbolic means of asserting their identity. The following are some examples of these studies.

Walters (1991) made a quantitative sociolinguistic study of Arabic as spoken in Korba, a small Tunisian town, to examine sex differentiation there. He compared and contrasted his findings with western studies. He was interested in phonological variables, especially the imāla, which is considered palatalisation, produced by a rising movement of the tongue towards the prepalatal region (Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd Edition). He found that ‘imāla is used by older people, less educated people and females. It is considered a feature of the dialect of Korba which is now looked down upon, especially when used outside Korba and with Tunisians from other areas.
Daher (1999) examined /θ/ and /ð/ as MSA variables realised differently in Damascene Arabic. He measured the way both phonological variables are realised by men and women. In Damascene Arabic the variables would be realised as s and z respectively. He found that men tend to realise them more in their standard form, θ and /ð/, than women did. In another study (1998), Daher examined another phonological variable realised differently in Damascene Arabic and standard Arabic, namely the uvular variable q, which is realised as a glottal stop in Damascene Arabic. He found that men tend to favour the connotations of q, while women avoid its connotations. The q variable is being introduced into the dialect through education. And since, according to Daher (1998: 203), education was ‘traditionally the domain of a small male elite’, women do not use the q as much as men. In fact, according to him, even educated professional women tend not to use it because the glottal stop is associated more with urbanisation and modernisation, while q is associated with men and rural speakers. He concludes that men and women in that context approach different norms, since MSA and the vernacular are two sets of norms instead of one.

The attachment of women to the urban variables and to modernisation is true both for studies done on the west (e.g. Gal 1978), and studies done on Arabic. Al-Wer (1999) reached a similar conclusion in her study, of the Palestinian and Jordanian dialects used by men and women in Jordan. She concludes that indigenous Jordanian women responded to the urban prestige norms more than men did. This is because, for them, urban Palestinian women represented finesse (1999: 41). Palestinian women appeared liberated, modern and better educated. Havelova (2000) reached a similar conclusion in the study conducted in Nazareth. Havelova posits that it is gender more than religion directing phonological variation. Women use the glottal stop more, while men tend to use the rural variant /k/.

Haeri (1996: 307) claims that ‘studies of gender differentiation have shown that women who have equal levels of education to men use features of classical Arabic significantly less than men’ (see also Haeri 2006: 529).

In spite the fact that talk-shows may not be representative as stratified samples of variationist research should be, talk shows can help demonstrate that certain general conclusions about the use of MSA by educated women should not be drawn; this study aims to provide another perspective, one that shows that educated women with access to MSA in fact can and do use it in certain contexts for a discourse