THE VARIABLE (H) IN DAMASCUS: ANALYSIS OF A STABLE VARIABLE

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1. Introduction

Variation in the presence of (h) in the 3rd person feminine and plural suffixes is a distinctive urban feature of the Syro-Lebanese dialects of the Levant. Descriptions of other dialects of Arabic indicate that this feature is also present in the Ḥijāzi dialect of Mecca in Saudi Arabia and in the qultu dialects of Iraq (Ingham 1971, Owens, personal communication). Data and examples available from the Arabic dialects of Africa and Uzbekistan, where Arabic is spoken as a minority language, also show that (h) is subject to variation in the pronominal suffixes in these dialects. In the Standard variety, i.e. Classical Arabic, /h/ is invariably present in the pronominal suffixes; that is in the 3rd person masculine, feminine and both the feminine plural and the masculine plural suffixes. In the case of Damascus Arabic, variability in the presence or absence of [h] in the dialect is known to have existed for over a century. Descriptions of the Syrian dialects, the earliest of which dates back to 1901, when Damascus was the metropolis of Greater Syria (present day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine), refer to the co-occurrence of two forms of the suffixes: /-ha/, /-hon/ and /-a/, /-on/; i.e. either with [h] or with Ø. Despite being identified as a variable feature in Damascus for over a century, (h) has not been investigated as a sociolinguistic variable in the dialect, and in fact not in any of the aforementioned dialects.

This paper is a sociolinguistic investigation of the variable (h) in the pronominal suffixes in the dialect of Damascus. The variation concerns the presence or absence of the variant [h] in the 3rd person feminine suffix /-ha/ and the plural, feminine and masculine, suffix /-hon/. The analysis is based on a speech sample taken from two localities in the city: an inner-city traditional quarter and a suburban district. The theoretical and methodological frameworks of the study take into account the urban extensions of the metropolitan city and
the need to use a joint analytical tool which can engage a macro and micro approaches simultaneously in the analysis of the socio-economic structure of the city’s communities. The interpretation and discussion of the results make use of the available data on (h) in the pronominal suffixes in other Arabic dialects and of the geographical distribution of (h) in Syria based on the available dialect maps of Syria (Bergsträsser 1915, Behnstedt 1997). In the course of the discussion, the morpho-phonology of the 3rd person singular and plural suffixes in the dialect is examined with the aim of providing a better understanding of the variation in question. An introduction of the variation of (h) in the pronominal suffixes, as it occurs in the dialect, is given followed by an outline of the methodology followed. In the final section, the data and the results are discussed.

2. Background

The earliest description of the variation in the presence of [h] in the pronominal suffix was noted by Crow in 1901. In the beginning of the century, however, there were no political borders in the Levant, and the material available to us from that period does not offer accurate data on the geography of this variation. Later descriptions and maps of the dialect, such as Bergsträsser (1915), Bergsträsser (1924), Blanc (1953), and Cowell (1964) Grotzfeld (1965), Cantineau (1966), and Ambros (1970), Lentin (1981) and more recently Behnstedt (1997), give unquantified data on the co-occurrence of [h] and Ø in the feminine and plural suffixes following a consonant, and [h] and [j] or [w] following a vowel.1

In the Standard variety, [h] is invariably present in 3rd person pronominal suffixes. The urban varieties in the Levant, including the Syrian varieties, differ from the Standard variety with respect to the suffix in two ways. Firstly, there is no gender marking in the plural suffixes. Some dialects neutralise the plural suffixes in favour of the masculine form, e.g. the Jordanian varieties, while others generalise the use of the feminine form, e.g. the Lebanese, the Syrian, and most of the urban Palestinian varieties. Secondly, the variant [h] only appears in the singular feminine and the plural suffixes. The dialects of the Levant, however, differ in the variation found in these suffixes.

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1 Cowell (1964) uses high vowels [i] and [u] instead of [j] and [w] alternatively.