

The Effect of Age on Dialect Change: The Case of Diphthongs in a Saudi Dialect

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Abstract - The aim of this paper is to investigate the changes that occur in one of the Saudi dialects, that is Ghamdi variety. The researcher examined the speech of Ghamdi migrants in the city of Mecca within the framework of dialect contact. Those migrants migrated from Al-Baḥa, a rural area in the south-western region of Saudi Arabia, to the city of Mecca in the Hijazi region. The data was collected through sociolinguistic interviews with 49 Ghamdi speakers, and one social variable was used namely, age. The speakers were divided into four age groups 14- 29, 30- 45, 46- 61 and 62+. This investigation was motivated by the obvious linguistic differences between rural Ghamdi and urban Meccan dialects. Two linguistic variables were examined: the diphthongs (ai) and (aw). The results showed that Meccan features, the monophthongs [ɛ:] and [ɔ:], occur in all age groups of Ghamdi migrants. This indicates that there is a change in progress toward Meccan features. Furthermore, the results of this research manifested intermediate features in the speech of Ghamdis, that can be described as narrower diphthongs [ɛi] and [ɔu].

Keywords - Dialect Contact, Migrants, Diphthongs, Sociolinguistic

I. INTRODUCTION

Changing in languages is one of its characteristics that fills us with surprise. From time-to-time new features emerge in the language while in other cases other features vanished. However, these changes do not suddenly occur, in fact, there are different social and linguistic reasons behind them. In this paper, the researcher investigated the changes occurred in one of Saudi varieties which is Ghamdi dialect. The Ghamdi dialect, is a variety that is spoken by speakers who live in Al-Baḥa city in the south- western region of Saudi Arabia. A large number of Ghamdis migrated to the sacred city of Mecca which locates in the Hijaz province; this brought Ghamdis into day-to day contact with Meccan people. The study is driven by the essential differences between Meccan and Ghamdi dialects; they are different on all linguistic levels, syntactically, morphologically, phonologically, phonetically and semantically. The diphthongs /ai/ and /aw/ are the investigated linguistic

variables, and age is the examined social variable. The data is collected from 49 speakers who are divided into four groups according to their ages, 14-29, 30- 45, 46-61 and 62+. Age is used as a tool to observe language changes by checking the linguistic differences between age group; it is assumed that these differences represent the change happened in the language or a dialect in real time (Chamber and Trudgill, 1998). The data is collected via sociolinguistic interviews. The results revealed that Ghamdi people accommodate to Meccan dialect. The preference of using Meccan monophthongs instead of the Ghamdi heritage features, diphthongs, was so obvious among young speakers. Moreover, the monophthongs occurred in the speech of all age groups with different rates which indicates that there is a change in progress towards Meccan features. Additionally, the data showed that Ghamdi migrants are using intermediate features, which are narrower diphthongs [ɛi] and [ɔu].



Map 1: Map of Saudi Arabia (Al-Baha and Mecca Locations)

The social context

The participants in this research are Ghamdi migrants. They migrated from Al-Baha, in the south west of Saudi, to dwell in the sacred city of Mecca, in the western Hijazi region.

Al-Baha is the name given to a mountainous region in the south west. It is a constellation of well over 300 villages. Traditionally, the local population relied on farming as a source of income; a minority of them were traders and merchants, whose trade brought them in contact with the near cosmopolitan cities such as Mecca and Jeddah. In the last few decades, the migration of Ghamdis to Mecca increased sharply; Ghamdi people were looking for easier lifestyle and better income. Now adays, Ghamdi migrants constitute a large segment of Meccan population, they occupy different jobs and live harmonically with Meccan people.

The sacred city of Mecca is visited by millions of people from all over the world every year, especially during the pilgrimage season. Over the centuries, many of these pilgrims never left the city, but ended up as residents.

Therefore, in addition to the original inhabitants of the tribes of, *Hudhail*, *Khuzaʿah*, and *Quraish*, the Meccan community encompasses peoples from almost all other locations inside the Peninsula, including Ghamdis, in addition to large groups from the Levant, Egypt, North Africa, Indonesia, China, India, Russia etc.

The linguistic context

Ghamdi dialect is one of Saudi varieties; it is spoken by sedentary people who live in Al-Baha villages. Al-Ghamdi (2008:13) states that the “Ghamdi dialect is one of the seven *ʔahruf* in which the Quran was revealed” (my translation). There are not many of studies that examine Ghamdi dialect. One of the well know works was done by Prochazka (1988), in his book ‘Saudi Arabian Dialects’, he described Ghamdi dialect on phonological, syntactical and morphically levels. In addition, there is another recent sociolinguistic study which was conducted by Alghamdi (2014). The Ghamdi dialect considered as one of the conservative varieties because it preserves some of the old Classical Arabic features. Listed below are some of these linguistic features:

- The presence of the classical diphthongs /aw/ and /ai/.
- The presence of n/ in the 2nd person singular feminine suffix, such as /tilʕabi:/.
- The presence of the interdental /ð/, /ð/ and /θ/.

In contrary, the Meccan dialect which is one of the urban Hijazi dialects that is spoken in Mecca. Unlike Ghamdi dialect, the Meccan dialect has been investigated by number of linguists. In 1971, Ingham presented a description of Meccan dialect. On the level of morphology and phonology, Bakalla (1973) has investigated Meccan Arabic. In addition, both Abu-Mansour (1987) and Kabrah (2004) provided a comprehensive description of the phonological syllable structure of Meccan Arabic.

The cosmopolitan nature of Mecca has caused its dialect to become a mixture of different varieties. Ingham (1971: 274) states,

“Meccan is a dialect of mixed affinities, basically of the Egypto-Levantine type in terms of its morphology and phonology but having much in common with the speech of the rest Arabian Peninsula in terms of lexis and syntax”.

This makes Meccan dialect different from most other Saudi varieties. Some of the salient features of the Meccan dialect are listed below:

- The absence of the diphthongs /aw/ and /ai/; the monophthongs /ɔ:/ and /ɛ:/ are used instead
- The deletion of /n/ in the 2nd person singular feminine suffix, such as /tilʕabi:/.
- The occurrence of stops/ sibilants [t/s], [d/z] and [d/z] instead of interdental [θ], [ð] and [ð] respectively.

II. THE STUDY

The Ghamdis migration from Al-Baha to Mecca started a hundred years ago or may be more, however, it increased sharply in the seventies of the last century. Now, Ghamdis live permanently in Mecca with their families, they are essential part of the Meccan social fabric. This mass migration brought and still bring Ghamdis in contact with Meccan people. This contact certainly would have an effect on the day-to-day dialect of both Ghamdis and Meccan. Inevitably, migrants in such a position usually tend to accommodate to each other for different reasons, such as to facilitate communication, show solidarity, show approval and sometimes in an attempt to sound modern. Over time,

this continuous accommodation leads to major changes in the dialects which are in contact.

The aim of this paper is to examine the change that occurred in Ghamdi dialect, particularly, in their usage of the diphthongs /aw/ and /ai/. This investigation is driven by the substantial difference between Ghamdi and Meccan varieties. Ingham (1971) reports the absence of these two diphthongs /ai/ and /aw/ in the Meccan dialect, which are replaced by the monophthongs /ɛ:/ and /ɔ:/, respectively. The table below shows examples of the diphthongs and monophthongs in Ghamdi and Meccan varieties.

Realisation of the diphthongs in the Ghamdi and Meccan dialects

Ghamdi	Meccan	
bait	be:t	‘house’
xaof	xɔ:f	‘fear’

III. METHODOLOGY

To sample the participants, the researcher followed the method of random sampling which was pioneered by Labov (1966). In this method, researchers do not apply any requirements for selecting their samples; instead they choose them randomly. Researchers who adopted random sampling believe that this method gives an equal chance to all individuals to participate; therefore, this would guarantee the concept of representativeness.

In this study, the researcher attempted to find an answer to the following question: Is there an age effect on the speech of Ghamdi migrants in Mecca? In the light of this question, the ages of the participants ranged from fourteen to seventy-five years old.

Among the different methods that are used to collect sociolinguistic data, the social interview is the most common technique and this is what the researcher adopted in this study. These interviews were not structured, the researcher initiated a free conversation and imbedded some prepared questions to control the flow of the conversation or sometimes to elicit the needed variables. Usually the length of the interview depends on the aim of the research and this is what Milroy and Gordon (2003) pointed out. In most cases, twenty to thirty minutes are enough to obtain good, phonological data.

The data were obtained by two kinds of social interview, a) a one-to-one interview where only the researcher and the

participant are engaged in a conversation, b) a group interview where the researcher and more than one participant are all engaged in a social gathering. Among the forty-nine interviews conducted for this study only a few were group interviews.

The interviews were constructed from two basic parts, the first being the part that encompasses questions about demographic information, which took place in the middle instead of the beginning as in the majority of the interviews. The researcher believed that delaying this part - demographic questions - creates a less formal interview and leads to a relaxed and a more intimate environment. Therefore, more real and natural speech can be gathered. The second part is the semi-free conversation. The researcher calls it 'semi-free conversation' because she tried, in an indirect way, to control the flow of the conversation by inserting one of the prepared topics or questions, which in turn helps to elicit a particular variable. In some cases, the researcher inserted a topic that could be better in encouraging the participants to speak. For instance, old- and middle-aged people always speak generously if the topic carries a comparison between contemporary and old life; whereas, young people (mostly students) talk at length if the topics are related to teachers, lectures and their exam experiences.

Regarding the social variable, age was selected in this study. Using age as a parameter to investigate linguistic change is a common method in sociolinguistic research. Age is used as a proxy to observe language change by focussing on the linguistic differences between different age groups; it is assumed that these differences represent the changes that have occurred in a particular dialect or language in real time (Chambers and Trudgill, 1998). So, the dialect spoken by a 70 year-old speaker represents the mainstream forty or fifty years ago, whereas speech produced by middle-aged speaker represents the linguistic trend twenty or thirty years ago and so on. Because the speakers in this study are of different ages, they were classified into four groups that encompass ages from 14 to 75 year. To analyze the data statistically the common software of SPSS was used.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data of the present study showed that the diphthongs [ai], [au] and the monophthongs [e:], [ɔ:] both occurred in the speech of Ghamdi migrants in Mecca. However, the analysis of the data also showed that, in addition to the diphthongs and monophthongs, Ghamdis in Mecca used intermediate variants; the intermediate features can here be described as narrower diphthongs phonetically as in the following examples

	Diphthong (Ghamdi)	intermediate	monophthong (Meccan)
(ai)	[ai] bait	[ei] be:t	[e:] be:t 'house'
(aw)	[au] laun	[ɔu] loun	[ɔ:] lɔ:n 'colour'

The occurrence of the intermediate form can be ascribed to the process of long-term accommodation *per se*. Trudgill (1986) says that, to accommodate to a new dialect, speakers may tend to reduce pronunciation dissimilarities. However, this accommodation might be incomplete in three different ways. One of these ways involves "using pronunciations intermediate between those of the two accents in contact" (ibid: 62). The researcher suggested that the intermediate

features in the Ghamdis' speech is like a bridge that Ghamdi speakers, unconsciously, created along the way to their target feature.

Diphthongs in relation to age

The table below shows that the difference between the speakers in the use of the (ai) set, [ai], [ei] and [e:] by age groups is highly significant ($p < .001$).

The percentage of (ai) variants in relation to age and the results of the significance test

Age	[ai] %	[ei] %	[e:] %	N
14-29	2	2	96	291
30-45	3	10	87	249
46-61	13	20	67	265
62+	30	25	45	199
Wald Chi-Square	18.626	108.995	38.572	-

Sig.	.001	.001	.001	-
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Regarding the results of the significance test at the level of 5%, the table below shows the difference between speakers in the use of the (aw) set by age groups as follows:

the difference between age groups in using the variants [ɔu] and [ɔ:] is highly significant ($p < .001$) and in using [aʊ], is significant ($p = .014$).

Percentage of (aw) variants in relation to age and the results of the significance test

Age	[aʊ] %	[ɔu] %	[ɔ:] %	N
14-29	3	6	91	142
30-45	2	10	88	142
46-61	15	22	63	108
62+	35	21	44	75
Wald Chi-Square	10.600	32.624	120.867	-
Sig.	.014	.001	.001	-

From the results of both (ai) and (aw), two main observations can be extracted. Firstly, the older speakers (62+) are the highest users of the Ghamdi and intermediate variants; the young speakers (14-29) are the highest users of the Meccan variants. Secondly, the change from diphthongs to monophthongs is in progress since the use of the target features [ɛ:] and [ɔ:] increased from 45% and 44% to 96% and 91% respectively without any decline in any stage and the results of statistical testing show that these differences are significant.

The first observation agrees with most sociolinguistic studies that examine the effect of age on dialect change. These studies (including Al-Shehri, 1993 and Jabeur, 1987) concluded that age is an important social factor in determining our ability to acquire a new linguistic system. Chambers (1992) says that when someone moves from one dialect to another, their ability to adopt the new dialect depends on age. The younger the migrant is, the better acquirer of the new dialect they are.

Regarding the second observation, it is not surprising that the change from diphthongs to monophthongs is increasing and in progress for two reasons: a) the diphthongs (ai) and (aw) are associated with a high level of awareness as they are considered as markers of the Ghamdi dialect and a few other Saudi dialects; and b) these two features are changed in most Saudi dialects to monophthongs which in turn makes them overtly stigmatised or at least highly marked (Labov (1972); Trudgill (1986)).

According to one of Chambers' principles (1992: 682), another reason can be added here, namely that producing a monophthong is phonetically easier than producing a diphthong and it is common that people tend to favour and acquire the easier feature.

V. CONCLUSION

As many sociolinguistic studies, the findings of this research showed that migrants are influenced by the host community linguistically as well as socially and vice versa. This research investigated the linguistic change in the speech of Ghamdi migrants who dwelled in the sacred city of Mecca. Within the frame of dialect contact, the researcher examined two Ghamdi sounds which are diphthongs /ai/ and /aw/ in relation to one social variable which is age. The results showed that there is a change in progress toward Meccan features, the monophthongs [ɛ:] and [ɔ:], despite of the different rates, they occurred in all age groups. The results also revealed that there are intermediate sounds occurred in the speech of Ghamdis which can be phonetically described as narrower diphthongs [ɛi] and [ɔu]. The researcher suggested that these intermediate features occurred as a result of the Ghamdi migrants attempt to acquire the target features monophthongs [ɛ:] and [ɔ:]; the intermediate sounds worked as a bridge to the target Meccan sounds. However, the researcher suggests that further research is needed to do more examination for the intermediate sounds, the narrower diphthongs, to check whether they are totally invented features and emerged in the Ghamdi dialect as a result of accommodation to Meccan dialect or if they are substantial sounds in the Ghamdi dialect.

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