

Linguistic change in rural child and adolescent Syrian Arabic

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Variation in adolescent language has been investigated mainly in urban and suburban areas, indicating that “emotional involvement in social identity” is more salient in adolescence than in any other life stage (Eckert 1988:206, 1991). This study investigates the spread of the urban features [ʔ] and [a] in place of the rural features [q] and [e] respectively in the vernacular Arabic of rural, non-migrant children and adolescents in the village of Oyoun Al-Wadi in Syria. The study shows that linguistic change in this village is moving in two opposing directions. Girls continue to use their initially acquired mothers’ urban features in their adolescent years; boys who initially acquired and used their mothers’ urban features start acquiring the village features around the fourth grade and increase their use of these features with age. Thus, the observed variation and changes that result from the different meanings associated with the urban and rural sounds under investigation are not only gender-related but also age-related (Kerswill 1996).

Fifty speakers ages 6-18 constitute the data set, equally divided into four age groups: 6-8, 9-12, 13-15, and 16-18. Groups are equally divided into girls and boys. Direct and indirect external factors are considered: origin of mother, area of residence, contact with external members, commuting, and influence of friends, classmates, or relatives in the village. The preliminary results of the quantitative analysis show wide spread of the urban features, particularly in the youngest age group. In the older age groups, the spread is retained in the girls’ speech but overturned towards the rural features in the boys’ speech.

Further qualitative investigation shows that both boys and girls ages 6-8 use urban features like their mothers. Towards the fourth grade, boys start switching to the village features because they carry meanings of vigor, masculinity, and a sense of belonging to the village (i.e., traditional values of males in the village). Girls are encouraged and continue to use the urban features because they carry meanings of femininity, softness, delicateness, and refinement. Older boys conceptualize the various social meanings associated with the rural and urban sounds and refuse to identify with the latter meanings. Consequently, they start abandoning the urban features after the age of eight.

Thus, the youth’s emotional involvement in building a social identity starts much earlier in their life than in adolescence. Their social and psychological development and the social meanings development of sounds are concurrent at every stage of their lives. However, age-grading is more apparent in boys’ than in girls’ linguistic behavior. As soon as they start recognizing the importance of certain sounds to the development of their village identity, boys deviate from their mothers’ forms. The different social meanings of the urban and rural sounds in this study are thus both gender- and age-related. They lead to salient linguistic differences between boys and girls and among boys from different age cohorts, resulting in the acquisition of different features at different stages in their lives and to bidirectional linguistic changes in youth language within the same community.