

An Initial Sociolinguistic Analysis of Aljouf Dialect

Análisis sociolingüístico inicial del dialecto Aljouf

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Abstract

This paper presents an initial sociolinguistic analysis of the varieties of Saudi Arabic spoken in the Aljouf region. The main objective of the paper is to uncover some of the sociolinguistic aspects characterizing the Jouf dialect as distinct from other Arabic variants in Saudi Arabia. Word lists and interviews were used for collecting data in Aljouf and four other areas, namely Ha'il, Alhijaz, Jazan, and Alkhubar. Four other dialects were included to provide a comparative dimension for the analysis, which was expected to consolidate the findings. Students enrolled in the sociolinguistics course at Jouf University participated actively in the process of data collection. The main criteria for selecting students were an affiliation with Aljouf and the named comparable regions. Results suggest that there are clear dialectal differences between the Aljouf dialect and the four other dialects. Variations in lexical choice were found to be relatively large between regions. Specifically, the differences between the Aljouf dialect and the Jazan dialect are greater than those between the Aljouf dialect and the Ha'il dialect. Age and gender differences were found to be significant among speakers of the Aljouf dialect. The speech of men and women proved to be slightly different with regard to certain lexical choices. Men and women used certain words that were exclusive to each sex. Speech variants between young men and women were reported by a considerable number of subjects. Slang and swearing, on the other hand, were identified as characterizing the speech of young males, who tended to use these words less as they approached adulthood.

Keywords: sociolinguistic; dialectal differences; age; gender; Aljouf; Saudi Arabia.

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Resumen

Este artículo presenta un primer análisis sociolingüístico de las variedades del árabe saudí habladas en la región de Aljouf. El objetivo principal del trabajo es desvelar algunos de los aspectos sociolingüísticos que caracterizan al dialecto de Jouf como distinto de otras variantes del árabe saudí. Se utilizaron listas de palabras y entrevistas para recopilar datos en Aljouf y otras cuatro zonas, a saber, Ha'il, Alhijaz, Jazan y Alkhubar. Se incluyeron otros cuatro dialectos para aportar una dimensión comparativa al análisis, con lo que se esperaba consolidar las conclusiones. Los estudiantes matriculados en el curso de sociolingüística de la Universidad de Jouf participaron activamente en el proceso de recogida de datos. Los principales criterios de selección de los estudiantes fueron la pertenencia a Aljouf y a las regiones comparables nombradas. Los resultados sugieren que existen claras diferencias dialectales entre el dialecto de Aljouf y los otros cuatro dialectos. Las variaciones en la elección léxica resultaron ser relativamente grandes entre las regiones. En concreto, las diferencias entre el dialecto de Aljouf y el dialecto de Jazan son mayores que entre el dialecto de Aljouf y el dialecto de Ha'il. Las diferencias de edad y sexo resultaron significativas entre los hablantes del dialecto de Aljouf. El habla de hombres y mujeres resultó ser ligeramente diferente en lo que respecta a ciertas elecciones léxicas. Hombres y mujeres utilizaban ciertas palabras exclusivas de cada sexo. Un número considerable de sujetos señalaron variantes del habla entre hombres y mujeres jóvenes. La jerga y las palabrotas, por otra parte, se identificaron como característicos del habla de los jóvenes varones, que tendían a utilizar menos estas palabras a medida que se acercaban a la edad adulta.

Palabras clave: sociolingüística; diferencias dialectales; edad; sexo, Aljouf; Arabia Saudí.

1. Introduction

Aljouf is located in the northern part of Saudi Arabia and populated by about 508,000 people, including a considerable number of expatriates from other Arab countries as well as Asians. The region has witnessed a consistent rate of development covering all sectors, especially health and education. Jouf University has further consolidated the development process in the region. In addition to Aljouf students, the university enrolls a good number of students coming from other areas of Saudi Arabia, which creates a unique environment for national integration. Almost all Saudi Arabia tribal affiliations are very well represented in the university. This ethnic diversity should, therefore, have an impact on the linguistic landscape of the region. It is well known that Arabic is the only language in Saudi Arabia, besides a number of other languages spoken by expatriates from various countries particularly South and Southeast Asia. Here, "linguistic diversity" refers to the use of various Saudi Arabian dialects. Saudi Arabic differs considerably from one region to another. As a consequence, one can easily distinguish a speaker of Saudi Arabic and locate him/her within a certain geographical area.

Saudi Arabic is an essential component of Peninsula Arabic, or Southern Arabic, spoken within the Arabian Peninsula, specifically in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Southern Iraq, and Jordan (by the native Jordanians). It is believed that the varieties of Arabic spoken in the Peninsula are very close to Classical Arabic compared to those spoken elsewhere. Some of the local dialects have retained many archaic features lost in other dialects, such as the conservation of notation for indefinite nouns. These dialects retain most

Classical syntax and vocabulary, but they are still slightly different from Classical Arabic. Saudi Arabic has a number of forms spoken in different regions of the kingdom. Hejazi (in the Hejaz region) and Najdi (in the central part of Saudi Arabia) are two of the most notable varieties of Saudi Arabic. Hejazi Arabic is spoken in Saudi Arabia along the coast of the Red Sea, especially in the cities of Mecca and Jeddah (Alahamadi, 2015). This dialect has two different forms: one spoken by the Bedouin rural population and the other spoken by the urban population (in Jeddah, Mecca, and Yanbu).

There are many such accent differences based on the regional affiliations of speakers. To British ears, a New Zealand pronunciation of “dead” sounds like “dad” and “bad” sounds like “bed” (Holmes & Wilson 2022). There are also vocabulary differences in the language varieties spoken in different regions. People in England use “single parents” to refer to a mother or a father with no partner, while Australians talk of “sole parents” instead. South Africans use the word “robot” to refer to the British term “traffic light.” Sudanese, on the other hand, uses the word *zool/zoola* [male/female] to refer to a person, while Syrians use the word *zalam* for the same concept. In Sudanese Arabic, the word *fowt* means “go away,” while people in Syria and Lebanon use the same word to mean “come in.”

Pronunciation and vocabulary differences are perhaps the most common in all languages across the world and people are well aware of the them. Grammatical differences can also be noted between dialects of a given language. One can easily distinguish American English from British English based on usage by speakers of the two dialects. Americans say “Do you have...?” while the British use the phrase “Have you got...?” Americans also use “gotten,” whereas British speakers use “got.” Although there are grammatical variations between most of the Arabic “dialects,” pronunciation and vocabulary differences are the most noticeable. One can claim that the variation in grammar across Arabic dialects is considered less than for other linguistic forms, namely pronunciation and vocabulary.

The differences that Arabic speakers in Saudi Arabia notice when they meet speakers of Arabic from other Arab countries are normal in all speech communities. French and Spanish, for instance, are languages spoken in a variety of countries other than France and Spain. Speakers of Spanish can hear differences in pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar in the Spanish spoken by Mexicans, Argentinians, and Paraguayans. Native speakers of French from Paris can distinguish between French speakers from Chad and French speakers from Sierra Leone.

Regional background is not the only factor influencing dialectal variations. Social status, context, and gender are among other important factors affecting language variation. Coates (1998) argues that it is common in all societies that men’s way of speaking is granted higher status compared with women’s way of speaking. Research in language variation has investigated the process by which listeners can identify regional dialects using acoustic clues. Clopper and Pisoni (2005) conducted a study on the perception of regional dialects of American English. Subjects were asked to listen to recordings of 11 male speakers in their twenties from different parts of the United States. The subjects were then asked to identify the geographical affiliations of the speakers. Results

showed that the speakers' regional backgrounds were accurately pinpointed depending on certain phonetic features in the speech of every single speaker.

Saudi Arabic has been studied by a number of scholars including Kamp & Yoffee (1980), Versteegh (2001), Charles & Ferguson (2003), Tahir (2009), Ishkevwy, Hera, & Farahat (2014), Lucas (2014), and Al-Rubaat (2022). All of these scholars investigated different structural aspects of Saudi Arabic, but none of them looked at the sociolinguistic aspect of the dialect. This paper presents an initial sociolinguistic analysis of the dialect, which will help future studies in the field. This study aims at describing Saudi Arabic spoken in the Aljouf region, with a particular focus on younger generation individuals (between 18-30 years old) residing in Sakaka, the capital city of Aljouf. The paper covers the structural characteristics of the dialect relating to pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. The main focus is on the sociolinguistic aspects of language use, such as the effects of language use on a participant's identity. Linguistic analysis of the dialect in question is not considered in terms of pure linguistic structure, as the focus is on the relationship between language use and users. In other words, the study uncovers some sociolinguistic aspects of the Jouf dialect pertaining to the identity of its speakers.

2. Methods of data collection

Labov's (1972B) approach in researching language variation has revolutionized research methods in sociolinguistics. The New York departmental stores case study suggests a clear and easy way of collecting data in language variation (Labov 1966). In the current study, personal interviews and word lists were used to collect data from subjects (students of Jouf University) residing in the Aljouf region or those coming from other parts of Saudi Arabia. Aljouf students who were native members of the speech communities were also consulted when verifying and comparing the data collected from speakers of other dialects, namely Hijazi, Ha'il, Alkhubar, and Jazan.

Involvement of the students in such research projects offers them the opportunity to receive training on the process of collecting sociolinguistics data and the instruments that are appropriate to the research topic and objectives. By doing so, the students have a solid basis for future research in linguistics in general and sociolinguistics fieldwork in particular. Thus, the students receive intensive training on field methods, with a special focus on collecting and processing sociolinguistics data. The first selection of prospective candidates was based on students' willingness to participate and their academic merit. The collection of sociolinguistics data specific to certain communities in the Aljouf region and other regions in Saudi Arabia, represented by students coming to Aljouf for university education, provides a wealth of information about the current language use. It is expected that the collection of this considerable amount of data will provide the basis for a more detailed investigation of the use of Saudi Arabic varieties in Jouf University and the possible influence resulting from contact with other Saudi dialects.

The sociolinguistics survey was based on personal observations during my sociolinguistics classes on which students from different regions of Saudi Arabia were enrolled. It was interesting

to hear different varieties of Saudi Arabic being used in the same class. In this sort of situation, students are expected to modify their speech to accommodate each other at different points and for different reasons, which might lead to a dialect change or the emergence of a new variety characterizing Jouf University students, as is the case with Kingiwana, a Swahili variety spoken by schoolboys in Zaire. The study is expected to raise a number of research questions for future studies. It would be beneficial to refine this picture and gain a better understanding of the ethno-linguistic identity in the area. The need to investigate the communities of practice in Aljouf and pursue an in-depth study with three components: interviews, observation, and a short questionnaire to be completed with family members and friends.

3. Procedures

Twenty students were selected from the sociolinguistics class. The students were familiarized with the concept of language variation in general and regional dialectology in particular. Examples of varieties of English were introduced and discussed in parallel with intensive comparisons with variations of Arabic across the Arab world. Samples of linguistic data relating to Saudi Arabic were given considerable space as the students were familiar with it. What made the task easier was the fact that students in the class came from different regions of Saudi Arabia such as Alhijaz, Jazan, Hafr Albatin, etc. As part of the sociolinguistics course, the students were briefed on Labov's variationist theory and methods of investigating language variations. Three case studies were reviewed, namely Firsherman's (1958) in New England, Labov's (1966) of Martha's Vineyard, and Labov's (1966) in New York City. The three case studies gave the students a clear picture about how language variations can best be researched. Then, the actual process of collecting data with word lists was discussed and carefully planned. Each student was asked to prepare a list of about 50 words from basic vocabulary, focusing on the dialectal differences they perceive during everyday conversation at their place of origin. Short interviews were also conducted with the students to collect data on differences in the use of certain vocabulary items across generations (e.g., words used by older people rather than younger people and vice versa). Two female MA students were also employed to collect words that were used exclusively by women in the Aljouf region (old and young women). A corpus of 1,200 words (the total number of words collected with lists) was collected from five dialects; Aljouf, Hijaz, Jazan, Ha'il, and Khubar. Out of the total number of words collected, only those with significant differences were used for analysis.

4. Results and discussion

Analysis of the data revealed consistent differences in vocabulary between the dialects under investigation. Table 1 gives a comparison of the Jouf dialect and Khubar dialect, showing a wide range of variation in vocabulary use. Thus, we can identify distinguishing features of the speech of people from Aljouf and Khubar depending on vocabulary and pronunciation differences. For

“neighborhood,” people in Khubar use the word *alfirej*, while Jouf people use the word *alhay*, which is exactly the same word used in Sudanese Arabic to refer to the same entity. Interestingly, the table shows Alkhubar people use some words originating from English that have been indigenized in Arabic language. The word *layit* is used by Alkhubar people to mean *misbaah* [lamp]. The word “light” [*layit*], for instance, has been borrowed from English and adapted morphologically and semantically to denote the entity “lamp”; that is, Khubar speakers use the English word “light” to mean the device “lamp.” This phenomenon is called “partitive” in Arabic, where part of the meaning of a word is taken to denote another entity or concept. Jouf people, on the other hand, prefer the Arabic word *nour* [light, the exact translated equivalent in English] when referring to a lamp. Other examples of English words in the Khubar dialect are *kabat* and *kondishan*, meaning “cupboard” and “air conditioner,” respectively. The representation of loaned English words in the Khubar dialect can be attributed to the fact that the people in Alkhubar are exposed to English because it is spoken by expatriates working in the oil industries and other sectors in the region.

Table 1. Jouf dialect versus Khubar Dialect

Jouf Dialect	Khubar Dialect	Classical Arabic	Meaning
<i>Alhaara</i>	<i>Alfirej</i>	<i>Alhay</i>	Neighborhood
<i>Nuor</i>	<i>Lyt</i>	<i>misbaah</i>	Lamp
<i>Dolab</i>	<i>Kabt</i>	<i>Khizanat almalabis</i>	Cupboard
<i>Aalam</i>	<i>Abkhis</i>	<i>Al?arif bilshi?</i>	The one who knows something
<i>Ikhlas</i>	<i>Injiz</i>	<i>Ikml alshi? bisur?a</i>	Make it quickly
<i>Shibaak</i>	<i>Darbasha</i>	<i>nafiza</i>	Window
<i>Ruh</i>	<i>Tis</i>	<i>izhab</i>	Go
<i>Khizarana</i>	<i>MiTrag</i>	<i>?asa</i>	Stick
<i>Mil?aga</i>	<i>Kimsha</i>	<i>Mil?aga</i>	Spoon
<i>Gaam</i>	<i>Faza</i>	<i>gama muri?an</i>	Run away
<i>Takalam</i>	<i>Gir</i>	<i>taklam</i>	Talk
<i>Nadi ?alih</i>	<i>Izham</i>	<i>Tahadath m?ahu</i>	Talk to him
<i>Adkhul</i>	<i>AgliT</i>	<i>Adkhul</i>	Enter
<i>Ingahart</i>	<i>Ta?asaft</i>	<i>nadima</i>	Regretted
<i>Dalla</i>	<i>Quri</i>	<i>Ibrig alshai</i>	Teapot

Source: Own author

Analysis of the data in Table 1 also suggests that speakers of Saudi Arabic in the Aljouf region can be reliably distinguished by a set of vocabulary attributes in their speech; that is, the use of certain vocabulary items reflects the regional identity of the speakers. This finding is consistent with a considerable number of other studies on dialect variations, namely Labov (1972 B) and Thomas (2001). The table indicates that the most significant differences between the Aljouf dialect and Khubar dialect are in terms of vocabulary and pronunciation. There are likely to be grammatical differences between the two dialects, but these are less important and are beyond the scope of this study. As such, the two dialects look noticeably different, particularly in the pronunciation of some sounds and the way in which they are replaced with each other. Table 2 shows more examples of pronunciation differences between the two dialects.

Table 2. Pronunciation differences between Jouf dialect and khubar dialect

Jouf dialect	Khubar dialect	Classical Arabic	Meaning
<i>Baazi?</i>	<i>baasiq</i>	<i>Bidon milh</i>	Without salt
<i>Alwar?aan</i>	<i>alwaqdan</i>	<i>alaTfal</i>	The children
<i>agmuT</i>	<i>agmuz</i>	<i>igfiz</i>	Leap
<i>adqTa</i>	<i>arqiTA</i>	<i>Adqut ?alihi</i>	Press him

Source: Own author

Table 2 shows that while Jouf people pronounce the sound [z] in the word *Baazi?* [without salt], Khubar replace it with the sound [s] followed by the sound [q]. Replacing a voiceless sound with a voiced one sharing the same place and manner of articulation ([s] with [z]) looks justifiable, but the addition of the sound [q] to the end of the word is very strange. More data for the same phenomenon may shed light on this odd occurrence of the sound in question. The addition and deletion of sounds seems to be consistent, as suggested by Table 2. In the word, *Baazi?* [without salt], for instance, the sounds [s] and [ʔ] in the Jouf dialect are replaced with [z] and [q], respectively, in the Khubar dialect. Apparently, this replacement is not based on any consistent phonological process. We cannot claim that the voiceless sound [s] in the Jouf dialect has lost its voicing in Khubar under the influence of the [i] vowel, as [i] exists in the same position in the Jouf form, *Baazi?*. A more interesting sound replacement is found in the word for “children”: this is *war?aan* in the Jouf dialect, but Khubar speakers use the sounds [q] and [d] instead of [r] and [ʔ], respectively. Regarding the distribution of the two sounds in *baazi* and *baasiq*, it can be suggested that the sound [ʔ] in the Jouf dialect is replaced with the sound [q] in the Khubar dialect. Yet, the consistency of this replacement needs to be further verified using more data from both dialects. Similar verification also needs to be made in order to help understand the replacement of [T] with [z] and [d] with [r], as appearing in *agmuT/agmuz* and *adqTa/arqiTa*, respectively.

5. Jouf dialect versus Ha'il dialect

The Ha'il region is considered the nearest to Aljouf in the way towards Medina and Mecca, on the one hand, and Riyadh, on the other. The importance of this location can be understood considering that Riyadh and Alhijaz are the main destinations for Jouf people who perform Haj and Omerah, or for those involved in socioeconomic activities in the two areas. Frequent contact between Aljouf people with those from Alhijaz and Riyadh will probably result in linguistic influences in their speech; that is, salient pronunciation and lexical differences can be observed. Table 3 provides comparative linguistic data summarizing some of the main areas of difference between Aljouf, Ha'il, and Alhijaz.

Table 3. Jouf dialect versus Ha'il Dialect

Jouf Dialect	Hail Dialect	Classical Arabic	Meaning
<i>Ahujis</i>	<i>Ahujis</i>	<i>Aufakir</i>	Think deeply
<i>yara?i</i>	<i>Yara?i</i>	<i>unzur ilih</i>	Look at it
<i>Baraha</i>	<i>Intibih</i>	<i>Tariyas</i>	Be careful
<i>Taa?a</i>	<i>Mushkila</i>	<i>Musiyba</i>	Problem
<i>faTin</i>	<i>FaTin</i>	<i>yatazakar</i>	Remember
<i>Yam?aT alagl</i>	<i>tihibil</i>	<i>Yazhab bila?al</i>	Amazing
<i>Bisura?</i>	<i>?ajil</i>	<i>Bisur?a</i>	Quickly
<i>Tawagi?</i>	<i>intibih</i>	<i>Intabih</i>	Pay attention
<i>Irooj</i>	<i>?ajil</i>	<i>Ista?jil</i>	Hurry up
<i>Yanoosh</i>	<i>Ilmis</i>	<i>Yalmas</i>	Touch
<i>Shusha</i>	<i>kisha</i>	<i>mankoosh</i>	Untidy hair
<i>Ashla?</i>	<i>imSa?</i>	<i>Igtali?</i>	Pull out
<i>Inkis</i>	<i>?awid/irja?</i>	<i>Ta?ood</i>	Come back

Source: Own author

Table 3 shows a considerable number of lexical differences between the Jouf dialect and the Ha'il dialect. Very few words were found to be used with the same meaning in both dialects, namely *ahujis* [to think], *yara?i* [to see], and *FaTin* [to remember]. This was confirmed by subjects from the two regions during verification interview sessions. The relatively long distance between the two regions (about 393 km) constituting the Alnofood desert and the existences of a number of tribes with different socioeconomic activities might justify lexical differences between the two speech communities. While most of the tribes in Aljouf perform agricultural activities, the majority of their counterparts in the Ha'il region are herders. The pattern of life is definitely a decisive factor in the process of language change, which reflects people's socioeconomic and sociopolitical activities. However, the two dialects are expected to come closer to each other, decreasing the present noticeable differences between them. This is because a growing number of students from the Ha'il region are attending Jouf University for at least four years of schooling. This increasing amount of contact is expected to influence the structure of the Aljouf dialect in the long run. In other words, speech convergence on the part of Aljouf-dialect speakers will take place towards the speech of those coming from Ha'il.

6. Jouf dialect versus Jazan dialect

The long distance between Aljouf and Jazan is one of the main factors influencing the linguistic differences in the speech of people in the two areas. The ethnic composition in the two regions is another factor playing a significant role in shaping people's speech. While Aljouf is located in the far north of Saudi Arabia, neighboring Jordan and Syria, Jazan is located in the far south, neighboring Yemen. In this situation, one expects linguistic influence due to language contact with the neighboring speech communities. That is, the north is expected to be influenced

by Jordanian and Syrian Arabic, while the south is influenced by Yemeni Arabic. The end result of these contrasting influences may be a sharp distinction between the two dialects, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Jazan and Jouf lexical contrast

Jouf Dialect	Jazan dialect	Classical Arabic	Meaning
<i>Izharat wa nawarat</i>	<i>Ashraqat</i>	<i>Marhaba</i>	Welcome
<i>?a?ni</i>	<i>Hab li</i>	<i>A?Tini</i>	Give me
<i>Ahsan</i>	<i>Ahsan</i>	<i>Ahssan/A?Dal</i>	Better
<i>Axwiya</i>	<i>Sudagan/rafaga</i>	<i>ASdiga</i>	The friends
<i>Alsarier</i>	<i>Alfirash</i>	<i>Sarier</i>	The bed
<i>Ab?id/azluf?ani</i>	<i>Hil?ni</i>	<i>Ib?id</i>	Get away
<i>Ithbat</i>	<i>Girr</i>	<i>Awgif</i>	Stop
<i>Alshayib</i>	<i>Alqahm</i>	<i>Al?ajooz</i>	the elderly man
<i>Zih</i>	<i>Zahif/Wasi?</i>	<i>Ifsah</i>	Make way
<i>Reh</i>	<i>Iflih/ingali?</i>	<i>Izhab</i>	Go
<i>Bias?</i>	<i>Fiz</i>	<i>Ib?id</i>	Hurry up
<i>Wali?</i>	<i>Shib</i>	<i>Ish?il</i>	Flame
<i>Yargil</i>	<i>Yatarajaf</i>	<i>Yartajif</i>	To tremble
<i>Yasgif</i>	<i>ya?Tyin</i>	<i>Ya?rish</i>	To build a roof

Source: Own author

As shown by the table, there is a significant difference between the Aljouf dialect and its Jazan counterpart. Almost all of the lexical items considered for analysis are completely different, with no similarities in terms of phonemic or morphological structures. One can claim that the linguistic differences between the two dialects are comparable to the geographical distance between the two regions (about 1,483 km). This embodies the Indian proverb of “Every two miles the water changes, every four miles the speech,” which suggests that words vary not only from region to region but also from city to city. Thus, speakers of Saudi Arabic coming from Sakaka, the capital city of the Aljouf region, may have some difficulty understanding a fellow Saudi from Jazan city. In fact, mutual intelligibility between speakers of Saudi Arabic from Jazan and some speakers of Saudi Arabic from other cities is sometimes difficult.

Some people claim that they can hardly understand the Jazan dialect, especially when it comes to lexical vocabulary. Words such as *garr* [go], *amlah* [make way], *yargal* [tremble], and *shab* [flame] are very strange to an Arabic ear, not only in Saudi Arabia but also in other parts of the Arab world. As a speaker of Sudanese Arabic, I had never heard of most of the lexical items I collected from the Jazan speakers involved in this project. To me, as an outsider, the Jazan dialect appears to be a language that has a considerable number of common aspects with Arabic. The dialect is definitely in need of further investigation in terms of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. The great differences between this dialect and other Saudi dialects suggest that there are many interesting linguistic and cultural aspects for future researchers to uncover.

7. Jouf dialect versus Alhijaz dialect

The location of the Alhijaz region next to the Red Sea coast, together with embracing Mecca and Medina—a Muslim’s most important cities—make it a melting pot for people coming from different parts of the world for pilgrimage and trade. As such, the Hijazi dialect has been influenced by many other dialects and perhaps languages. As is the case with all Saudis, Aljouf people who visit Alhijaz for religious and commercial reasons experience speech accommodation in terms of the speech of the Hijazi dialect. The resultant influence is expected to affect certain linguistic aspects including pronunciation and lexical borrowing. Table 5 presents a systematic comparison for selected vocabulary from the two dialects.

Table 5. Jouf dialect versus AlHijaz Dialect

Jouf Dialect	Alhijaz	Classical Arabic	Meaning
<i>Dahien</i>	<i>Alhien</i>	<i>Alan</i>	Now
<i>midxaal</i>	<i>bawaba</i>	<i>Madkhal almanzil</i>	House entrance
<i>Daloo?</i>	<i>Daloo?</i>	<i>Mudalal</i>	Spoiling
<i>Anzil</i>	<i>Anzil</i>	<i>Inzil</i>	Get down
<i>SawiT li</i>	<i>Sawit li</i>	<i>Nadini</i>	Call me
<i>Yaabis</i>	<i>Naashif</i>	<i>Jaaf</i>	Dry
<i>Askut</i>	<i>Askut</i>	<i>iSmut</i>	keep silent
<i>irbuZ</i>	<i>Girr</i>	<i>lhda</i>	Be quiet
<i>Shusha</i>	<i>kisha</i>	<i>Alsha?ar alkath</i>	thick hair
<i>Juqma</i>	<i>Juqma</i>	<i>Juqma</i>	Snip
<i>Adiga</i>	<i>isTar</i>	<i>iDrab</i>	Hit
<i>Iflita</i>	<i>Sibu</i>	<i>Itrukahu</i>	Leave it alone
<i>Dayieg</i>	<i>Muhazag</i>	<i>Dayieg</i>	Tide
<i>Bisaa/ajil</i>	<i>Gawaam</i>	<i>Bisura</i>	Quickly
<i>adeel</i>	<i>Duqri/adeel</i>	<i>adeel</i>	Straight

Source: Own author

Analysis of the linguistic features of Aljouf, Ha’il, and Jazan reminds us of the concept of “dialect chains” in Europe. One chain, for instance, links all the dialects of Norwegian, Swedish, and Danish, so that Swedes and Norwegians in adjacent areas can communicate easier than fellow-Swedes from southern and northern Sweden (Holmes & Wilson 2022). Aljouf, Ha’il, Alhijaz, and Jazan constitute a similar dialect chain extending from the far north to the far south of Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi context, however, although speakers of the four dialects can understand each other relatively easily, some find it difficult to understand vocabulary items from the dialects that he/she does not speak. The Arabic spoken in Aljouf villages that border Ha’il has more in common with the Jouf dialect compared with the situation in the border areas between Alhijaz and Jazan. This suggests that the linguistic differences between the Aljouf dialect and Jazan are greater than those between the Aljouf dialect and Alhijaz/Ha’il dialects.

8. Language, age, and gender in Aljouf

Among the frequently asked questions in sociolinguistics are: Do men and women speak differently? And do children speak differently from adults? The answers to those questions are always “Yes” for all speech communities across the world. In such closed communities like those in the Arab Peninsula, one expects huge differences between the speech of men and women. This is because the relationship between men and women is determined by strict social rules and religious traditions. Generally, the language is shared by men and women, but certain linguistic features occur only in men’s speech or only in women’s speech. These features are manifested in minor pronunciation differences or word forms. That is, women use some words that are considered exclusive to women’s speech. A man is unlikely to utter such words in any mode of conversation. If such a thing ever happens, the man will normally face severe criticism from the other participants.

Gender differences in language represent one aspect of more pervasive linguistic differences in society, reflecting social status or power differences (Holmes & Wilson 2022). In societies where men are more powerful than women, such as when a wife is subordinate to her husband, she may not be able to address him by using his name. Instead, she may address her husband with a phrase such as *Abu X* [father of X, where X is normally the name of his first son]. When a wife does not have a child, she addresses her husband with his father’s name. For instance, if the husband’s father’s name is Mohamed, the wife will address him, or talk about him, by using the phrase *Abu Mohamed*. Avoiding the use of the husband’s own name is evident in almost all of the Arab world including my country, Sudan. Personally, I have never heard my mother use my father’s name when addressing him or talking about him. Instead, *Abu Fathi* is the phrase my mother uses to refer to my father even now, more than 30 years after his death.

The analysis (Table 6 & Table 7) shows that word choice was the most obvious speech difference between men and women. The data suggests that women in the region use certain words that are not used by men at all. Words such as *aghaS* [get up], *afhaga* [get it away], *yanTil* [to steal], *goTir* [go], *anTa* [give him], *douhaj* [went], and *inhar* [go] are used exclusively by older women. Younger women in Aljouf, on the other hand, were reported to frequently use words such as *zawan* [now], *tawaTah* [sat on], *ilhag* [come], *IglaT* [enter], *washowla* [why], *hastartini* [you made me mad], and *ya lonak* [you are strange]. The language differences between older and younger women are expected to become even greater, given the growing influence of social media which dominates younger women’s lives. Younger women spend much of their time on Facebook, WhatsApp, and Snapchat communicating with others at a similar age and with similar interests. This means that the social distance between older and younger women will widen and the linguistic differences will become even greater.

Table 6. Words used by old people only

Old people forms	Equivalent in younger people's speech	Meaning
<i>Arwij</i>	<i>diz</i>	Hurry up
<i>Inhar/ inhHaj</i>	<i>?ajil</i>	Go
<i>Tnman</i>	<i>ruz</i>	Rice
<i>Owgid</i>	<i>Shib/wali?</i>	To set fire
<i>Sihien</i>	<i>sahan</i>	Small bowel
<i>Alfiet</i>	<i>Alshi?</i>	Thing
<i>Hudoom</i>	<i>malabis</i>	Cloths

Source: Own author

Table 7. Words used by Jouf young people

Youth forms	Equivalent in old people's speech	Meaning
<i>?ajil</i>	<i>Bisa?</i>	Quickly
<i>Ruh.</i>	<i>Tis</i>	Go
<i>Shab...</i>	<i>Owgid</i>	Kindle a fire
<i>Badri</i>	<i>mubakir</i>	Early
<i>ArkuD</i>	<i>arwij</i>	Run
<i>Zaki</i>	<i>faTien</i>	Clever
<i>Tazkart</i>	<i>faTant</i>	Realized

Source: Own author

Pitch, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar can all distinguish speakers from different age groups. The extensive use of swear words by some teenagers is likely to distinguish them from other age groups (Holmes & Wilson, 2022). The frequency with which swear words are used decreases as teenagers grow older and socialize more with other individuals in their immediate speech communities. Holmes & Wilson (2022) asserts that swearing is, in most cases, restricted to all-male settings, while it is reduced significantly among women as they move into adulthood. The data collected via interviews reported very few instances of swearing among younger males and females in Aljouf. This may be due to the conservative nature of the community and the Islamic faith that strictly prohibits swearing.

Slang is another area of vocabulary reflecting a speaker's age. Slang is a characterizing feature of younger people and it sounds extremely unusual in the speech of an older person. In the Arab world, parents normally do not accept the use of slang in the home environment, making sure that such words are not spoken by their children. That is, whenever a younger man uses a slang word in the presence of his father or mother, he will probably be firmly ordered not to use such words again, either at home or elsewhere. However, like many speech communities across the world (Randuk in Sudan Mugaddam 2012 & Mugaddam 2015), youths in Saudi Arabia manipulate existing Arabic words semantically to denote particular things within their own community. As the purpose of this paper is to present an initial sociolinguistic analysis of the Jouf dialect, this kind of language is not examined further. A separate detailed investigation is recommended for further research, involving a larger sample size of the youth population.

Apart from swearing and slang, the data (see Table 6 and Table 7) show that older and younger people use different vocabulary items. That is, some words are used exclusively by younger men, whereas other words are used by older men in Aljouf in ordinary conversation. Words such as *halal*, *arwij*, *awgid*, and *tasant* are regularly noticed in the speech of older people to mean “sheep,” “hurry up,” “flame,” and “listen,” respectively. Younger men, on the other hand use the words *mashiya*, *asri? shab*, and *asma?* to denote the same concepts. The data also indicate that words such as *Ruh*, *Ba?aarien*, *iTla?* and *Shab* are used almost exclusively by younger men and women in the region to mean “go,” “quickly,” “get out,” and *wali?* respectively. It is important to note that both sets of words (those used by older people and those used by younger people) are all Arabic words used in the respective speech communities, but the use of either set indicates the age of the user (old or young). If things continue in the same way, most of the words characterizing the speech of older people will gradually disappear in the Aljouf dialect. However, this does not mean that they will completely disappear from Arabic, as they will continue to be used in other Arabic-speaking countries.

9. Conclusion

The way people speak is normally a good indicator of their social and regional backgrounds. A social and/or regional background can be identified by certain linguistic features that are used frequently by a given community. This paper investigated the linguistic clues that distinguish speakers of Saudi Arabic in the Jouf area from speakers of Saudi Arabic elsewhere across the kingdom. Four areas were identified for an initial comparison with the Aljouf region, namely Khubar, Ha'il, Alhijaz, and Jazan, using word lists prepared via interview and participant observation. Results suggested that people in the Aljouf region speak Arabic differently from people in the other areas involved in the study. This linguistic difference was observed in the different lexical items that are used exclusively by speakers of Saudi Arabic in Aljouf. The study also showed that the linguistic differences become greater as we move from Aljouf in the far north of Saudi Arabia to Jazan in the far south, constituting a form of dialect chain. However, the differences do not prevent speakers of Saudi Arabic in the five regions from communicating easily and smoothly. This is because these people all speak one form of language—Saudi Arabic—but in a way that shows their different regional and ethnic identities.

Age and gender differences in the language used were also addressed by the study using data collected via personal interviews with people of all ages from both sexes. The analysis showed that there are lexical items used exclusively by older speakers and there are others used only by the younger generation. Gender differences in language use were also found between men and women in the area. It was reported that certain words were used only by men and others were used exclusively by women in conversation. Moreover, older women were reported to use certain words that were not heard in the speech of younger women, and vice versa. Interestingly, both older and younger women do not address their husbands, or talk about them, by using their first name. The phrase *Abu X* [father of X] is used instead, even if the couple do not have children in which case the husband is addressed by using *Abu* followed by his father's name.

Swearing and slang were found to be used by younger males within their immediate networks. It was unusual to hear slang and/or swear words in the speech of older people (male or female) or younger females across the community. Further investigation into this aspect may uncover interesting results that might help to understand the local culture in the region.

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DECLARATION

Conflict of interest

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Notes

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