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Phonetic Diversity in Arabic Dialects: A Comparative Analysis of *Tha'*, *Jeem*, *dāl*, *Qaf*, and *Kaf*

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Abstract

*This research examines the variations in Arabic dialects across different geographical areas, focusing on five letters— ث *THA'*, ج *JEEM*, ق *QAF*, ك *KAF*— and د *dāl* which exhibit distinct and controversial pronunciation differences. These differences often vary significantly between countries and sometimes within regions of the same country. The study identifies the historical, social, and geographic factors contributing to the diversification of Arabic dialects.*

Keywords: *bedouin, SA, levant, Arabic dialects, pronunciation, phonetic variation, tha', jeem, qaf, kaf, dāl.*

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Phonetic Diversity in Arabic Dialects: A Comparative Analysis of *Tha'*, *Jeem*, *dāl*, *Qaf*, and *Kaf*

II- Introduction

Arabic's rich linguistic history and geographic diversity exhibit an impressive phonetic range across the many dialects of Arabic. Modern Standard Arabic provides a shared linguistic foundation, while the spoken varieties of Arabic differ significantly regionally, due to historical, social, and geographic influences. Amongst the 28 letters of Arabic alphabet, five letters, ج jeem, ق qaf, ذ dāl, ض dad, and ث tha' (tha')—show particularly marked phonetic variations. These letters, more than any others, show sharp phonetic differences that distinguish one dialect from another and serve as major markers of linguistic style.

This research illustrates the curious phonetic variations of these letters, by illustrating how the historical relationships, migrations, trade routes, and colonial influences over the past centuries have shaped significantly their different pronunciations. It also seeks to clarify how speakers across the Arab world pronounce these sounds differently, highlighting how this diversity contributes to our understanding of the phonetic diversity in spoken Arabic dialects. This research offers potential insights into the historical development of the Arabic language and the cultural dynamics of its speakers.

Geographic variations are classified into four main regional groups: the Gulf countries, Egypt and Sudan, the Levant, and the Maghreb, in order to illustrate the analysis. The study identifies and classifies specific phonetic features that represent each group, linking them to broader local linguistic characteristics.

III Literature Review

The Arabic language, with its rich linguistic feature, is characterized by significant phonetic diversity that depends on the dialect. Within the 28-letter Arabic alphabet, five letters distinguished by their diversity: [ج] (jeem), [ق] (qaf), [ذ] (dāl), [ض] (ḍād), and [ث] (tha). Current researchers claim that Arabic originated from the Aramaic script and was introduced to the Arabian Peninsula via the Nabataeans. (Luxenberg, 2007).

Ibrahim (2005, p.17) believes that several factors contributed to the phonetic and dialectal diversity of Arabic. These include tribal fragmentation, the lack of unity among merchants and tribal leaders, and the influence of non-Arabic speakers. Fayadh (1998) refers to the 28 Arabic letters as comprising both consonants and vowels; he identifies Alif (A), Waw (W), and Ya (Y) as the vowels. However, vowels are often subject to phonetic changes such as inversion, substitution, addition, and deletion.

Al-Saleh (2021) notes that dialectal variation in Arabic can reflect a wide range of social and geographical influences, especially with letters that are frequently mispronounced. Four of these letters—[ث] (tha), [ج] (jeem), [ذ] (dāl), [ق] (qaf), and [ك] (kaf)—are pronounced differently across regions. The variation in these letters is shaped by both social and geographic factors. For instance, the letter [ث] (tha) may take on entirely different forms due to a variety of phonetic processes, including inversion and substitution.

2- Definition of Dialect:

Abdulghafar Hilal defines dialect in his book *Arabic Dialects* (1989, p.15-16) as the speech habits of a small group within a larger group of people who speak the same language, while Zahran (2008, p.275-76) states that it is a set of linguistic traits belonging to a specific environment, shared by all individuals in that environment. The dialectal environment is part of a broader and more comprehensive environment, encompassing several dialects, each with its own characteristics but all sharing a set of phenomena.

VI - Research Objectives

1. Recognize pronunciation variations: document and describe the pronunciation variations among letters ض, ق, ج, and ث, across Arabic dialects.
2. Historical Background: investigate the historical sources of these pronunciation variations.
3. Social and geographic contexts: examine the social and geographic considerations that impact pronunciation variations.
4. Overall dialectal changes: analyze how this is connected to overall changes in the dialects of Arabic.

Research Method and proposed plan

1. Literature review: As described earlier, to develop a theoretical framework for the project.
2. Data collection: Audio recording articulation from native speakers in different geographical areas.
3. Phonetic Analysis: Use the phonetic transcription and analysis software to analyze the pronunciation variations.
4. Surveys and interviews: conduct surveys and interviews with native speakers to gather their thoughts on the accentual pronunciation differences from dialect speakers.
5. Synthesis: Bring everything together to form well-thought-out conclusions.

V - Research Method

1. Literature review: a comprehensive survey of the previous research surrounding Arabic phonetics and dialects.
2. Data collection: gather pronunciation data from native speakers across different geographical areas, incorporating urban and rural speakers.
3. Phonetic analysis: conduct analysis using phonetic transcription and analysis software.
4. Surveys and interviews: develop surveys and interviews to understand native speaker's thoughts on these pronunciation variations.

VI- Research plan

1. Phase 1 Preparation
 - Scope of work/ target geographical area.
 - Develop survey and interview tools.

VII - Detailed Analysis

Variations in Pronunciation of the Target Letters

- 2.1-The letter *Tha*, /θ/ “ث”, the fourth letter in the Arabic alphabet, is a unique sound in Arabic phonetics and one of the silent letters, independent in pronunciation, and pronounced in vowels. It is a whispered fricative sound that echoes between the teeth and the tip of the tongue and is pronounced by placing the tongue between the edges of the upper and lower folds when pronouncing it with the passage of air from the nose. In the colloquial dialect, the *s* or *t* is inverted (Fayadh 1998, P. 36). The letter *tha* takes four shapes in writing, as discussed in Table 1:

Table 1: written shapes of the letter *tha* within the text in different positions

position	contextual form	example
Isolated	ث	تلوث /ta'law.wuθ/, pollution

Initial	ث	ثوم /θu:m/, garlic
Middle	ث	مثال /mi:'θa:l/, example
Terminal	ث	خبث /xa'bi:θ/, malicious

Despite its different visual representations, its sound remains constant across various vowels, harakat, with fatha (ث) pronounced as "tha", damma (ث) as "thu", and kasra (ث) as "thi" (Sobranews, 2018). Tha /θ/ is one of the most inverted and substituted letters in the Arabic dialects with the following patterns:

2.1.1- In the dialects spoken by the people of Morocco, Algeria, and Libya, certain sounds are inverted, resulting in distinctive variations in pronunciation. For example, the word for "triangle" is pronounced as /mutal.lat/ (ملت), "rich" as /ta.ri:/ (ثري), and "snow" as /tal.ḍʒ/ (ثلج). On the other hand, in the dialects of Egypt and Sudan, there is a noticeable shift where the sound "S" is more prevalent. Thus, "triangle" is pronounced as /masalas/ (مسلسل), "rich" as /sary/ (سري), and "snow" as /sal.ḍʒ/ (سلج). This contrast highlights the regional linguistic diversity within the Arab world, reflecting both historical influences and local adaptations of the language. Moreover, these phonetic differences are not just limited to specific words but demonstrate a broader pattern of sound shifts across various dialects.

2.1.2- In contrast, the Levantine dialect demonstrates a more complex phonetic variation, adopting three distinct forms of pronunciation. In urban areas, both "T" and "S" sounds are commonly used, resulting in words like /mutal.lat/ (ملت) or /musalas/ (مُسلّس) for "triangle," /sary/ (سري) for "rich," and /talj/ (ثلج) for "snow." However, in rural and Bedouin regions, a different sound, "tha" (ث), is more prevalent. This shift produces pronunciations such as /mu'θal.laθ/ (مُثلث) for "triangle," /thary/ (ثري) for "rich," and /θal.ḍʒ/ (ثلج) for "snow." This layered diversity within the Levantine dialect highlights the interplay between geographical location and linguistic shifts. While urban speakers tend to gravitate toward more simplified sounds like "T" and "S," rural and Bedouin communities retain the classical "tha" sound, suggesting a preservation of older phonetic elements. Furthermore, this variation within the Levant contrasts sharply with the Maghrebi and Egyptian-Sudanese dialects, where the inversion or retention of specific sounds forms a distinctive linguistic identity. Overall, these differences reflect not only the rich cultural diversity across regions but also the intricate evolution of the Arabic language over time.

2.1.3 In the western region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the sound is typically pronounced as "S," similar to the pattern found in Egypt and Sudan. However, in the dialects of the people of Qatif, Bahrain, and Abu Dhabi, a further variation occurs where the "S" sound is replaced by "F." This unique pronunciation results in forms such as /mufalaf/ (مفلّف) for "triangle," /fary/ (فري) for "rich," and /fal.ḍʒ/ (فلج) for "snow" (Al-Saleh, 2021).

Thus, it is clear how the Arabic dialects across the Arabian Peninsula, while closely related, exhibit distinct phonetic differences. This divergence between the western region of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region adds yet another layer of complexity to the linguistic landscape. Furthermore, the replacement of "S" with "F" in the Gulf area suggests a localized adaptation that could be influenced by cultural or historical factors specific to these regions.

Taken together, the variations across Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, the Levant, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf underscore the deep linguistic diversity within the Arab world. Each

region has evolved its own unique phonetic tendencies, influenced by a combination of historical migration, geographic isolation, and cultural exchange. These subtle sound shifts not only shape regional identities but also reflect the adaptability and richness of the Arabic language.

2.2 The letter *jeem* is the fifth of the alphabet, and one of the independent silent letters with softened movements. The sound of this letter is a complex sound and is the only Arabic sound with this feature. It is a gingival, palatal, explosive fricative sound (both strong and soft) (Fayadh 1998, P. 40). It takes four shapes in writing as discussed in Table 2:

Table 2: written shapes of the letter *jeem* within the text in different positions

position	contextual form	example
Isolated	ج	مرج /marʒ/, meadow
Initial	جـ	جوع /dʒu:ʕ/, hunger
Middle	جـ	تجربة /ta. dʒ ar'ba/ experiment
Terminal	جـ	مزعج /muzʕidʒ / annoying

Similarly to the *tha* the letter *jeem* is pronounced as ja (جـ) , ju (جـ) with the damma , and ji(جـ) with the kasra (Sobranews, 2018). The letter *jeem* is pronounced in Arabic dialects with six forms:

2.2.1 The eloquent *jeem* is pronounced [dʒ], “and it is the same original pronunciation in Modern Standard Arabic MSA. Most dialects of central, northern, and western Arabia, Iraq, Sudan, some regions of Yemen, and some Levantine Bedouin dialects pronounce it this way. For example, the words / dʒɪbɪl/ جبل mountain, /ʔæm.wa:dʒ/ أمواج waves, and /ʃaj.ra/ شجرة tree.

2.2.2 the Egyptian *jeem* is pronounced [g], which is a voiceless, plosive sound. Egypt and the rest of Yemen pronounce it this way. For instance, using the same previous examples, *gabal* جبل mountain, *amwag* أمواج waves, and *shagara* شجرة tree.

2.2.3 Levantine *jeem* which is identical to the /j/ utterance in English, and it is a local pronunciation of the first pattern, or is a development of it. It is a voiceless (soft) voiced gingival-palatal fricative, and is pronounced in urban and urban areas throughout the Levant and some villages in southern Iraq like the pronunciation of the words: *jabal* جبل mountain, *amwaj* أمواج waves, and *shajara* شجرة tree.

2.2.4 changed the *jeem* to ya [j], and it is pronounced in the dialect spoken in the eastern section of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Kuwait, Bahrain, and some areas of southern Iraq to wit: *yabal* جبل mountain, *amway* أمواج waves, and *shayara* شجرة (tree).

2.2.5 replacing the *jeem* with the *dāl* on the tongues of some common people in Egypt, specifically in Upper Egypt e.g. *dabal* جبل mountain, *amwad* أمواج waves, and *shadara* شجرة tree.

2.2.6 Replacing the letter *j* with the letter (z) in some ancient Syrian and Palestinian dialects “has become rarely used and exclusive to the elderly” and some Tunisian and Moroccan dialects (Khalaf 2014, p.). For example, *zabal* جبل mountain, *amwaz* أمواج waves, and *shazara* شجرة tree.

2.3- **The letter dāl:** It is one of the phonetic elements originating from the ancestral Semitic language. It has remained consistent over time in languages such as Arabic, Ugaritic (spoken in ancient Ugarit, now modern Ras Shamra, Syria), and Sabaean (an ancient South Arabian language used by the Sabaeans between 1000 BC and the sixth century AD) (Sobranews, 2018). It is the ninth letter of the Arabic alphabet. In Classical Arabic the letter dāl is pronounced with a voiced dental fricative (ð). However, this pronunciation varies in colloquial dialects, and it often becomes a voiced dental fricative (z), or a voiced stop voice (d). It is one of the six alphabet letters which refuses to connect with the following letter. dāl takes only two shapes in writing as discussed in Table 3:

Table 3: written shapes of the letter dāl within the text in different positions

position	contextual form	example
Isolated and initial	ذ	ذرة / dūra/ corn رذاذ /radad/ spray
Middle and final	ـذ	تلميذ /tilmid/ student حذاء /hida'/ shoes

The letter dāl, with fatha, it is pronounced as da(ذ) , with damma du (دُ) , and with kasra di (دِ) (Sobranews, 2018). The letter dāl is pronounced in Arabic dialects with three different forms:

- 2.3.1 The original pronunciation of the sound /ð/ (as in the English "th" in "this") is commonly retained in Bedouin areas and some rural regions across Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, as well as in Jordan. This pronunciation is also prevalent in Kuwait, the UAE, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar, and most Saudi Arabian cities. Examples include words like **ðaky** (ذكي, clever), **buðour** (بذور, seeds), and **Khouða** (خوذة, helmet). The presence of this pronunciation highlights the influence of Bedouin speech patterns on local dialects, maintaining the older phonetic structure of the Arabic language.
- 2.3.2 In many urban areas, particularly in Palestine, Lebanon, and Syria, as well as in certain cities in Jordan such as Amman, Irbid, and Zarqa, the sound /ð/ has shifted to /z/. This is also true in Egypt, Sudan, and the Saudi cities of Jeddah and Qaseem. For example, words like **zaky** (زكي, clever), **buzour** (بذور, seeds), and **Khouza** (خوذة, helmet) reflect this phonetic change. **Similarly**, this sound substitution can be found in other regions, which suggests a broader phonetic evolution in Arabic dialects. **Additionally**, the shift between rural and urban speech patterns demonstrates how urbanization influences language over time.
- 2.3.3 In Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, and Algeria, the sound /d/ replaces /ð/ in most contexts. This shift is also observed in certain words in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan, where words like **dahab** (ذهب, gold), **deeb** (ديب, wolf), and examples like **daky** (ذكي,

clever), **budour** (بدور, seeds), and **Khouda** (خودة, helmet) reflect the substitution. **Moreover**, this change aligns with the general trend of dialectal variation across North Africa and the Levant. **As a result**, these differences highlight how Arabic dialects diverge geographically.

2.4- **The letter qāf:** is the twenty-first letter of the alphabet in the Arabic language. It is one of the silent letters. It is a uvular, explosive, voiced sound according to ancient scholars and specialized reciters. However, it is now a voiceless sound among modern speakers (Fayadh 1998, P. 96). Its written form is shown in table 4:

Table 4: written shapes of the letter *qaf* within the text in different positions

position	contextual form	example
Isolated	ق	سوق /su:q/ Market
Initial	قـ	قديم /qa'di:m/, old
Middle	ـقـ	مقبض /'mɪq.bad/ Handle
Terminal	ـق	شفق /ʃa.faq/, Twilight

The letter **qaf** follows the same pattern: with **fatha**, it is pronounced as **qa** (قَ); with **damma**, as **qu** (قُ); and with **kasra**, as **qi** (قِ) (Sobranews, 2018). In pronunciation, it takes four different patterns., similar to the letter kāf:

- I. It is pronounced like the hamza [ʔ] in most of Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, as well as Egypt: *amar* أَمَر moon, *ma'as* مَنَصْ scissors, and *sandoua* صَنْدُوْ box.
- II. It is pronounced like kaf [k] in some areas of Syria, some areas of Algeria, and the Palestinian countryside: *kmar* كَمَر moon, *makas* مَكَصْ scissors, and *sandouk* صَنْدُوكْ box.
- III. It is pronounced like jeem (original) [dʒ] in the Iraqi dialect and some gulf dialects, so they pronounce *dʒmar* جَمَر (moon), *madʒas* مَجَصْ scissors, and *sandoudʒ* صَنْدُوجْ box.
- IV. It is pronounced like the soft [g] (Egyptian jeem) in most of the dialects of the Arabian Peninsula and the bedouins of Jordan and its rural areas, and some regions of Syria (such as the bedouins, Daraa, the northeast, the east, and some places in the center), Palestine (Hebron, the Bedouins of the Negev, and Gaza), and Egypt (the Bedouins of Sinai, the Eastern Desert, the Fallen, and the Sa'idah). And most of Libya, and it is pronounced this way even in classical Arabic by some in Yemen. *gamar* قَمَر moon, *magas* مَقَصْ scissors, and *sandoug* صَنْدُوقْ box.
- V. The original pronunciation of [q] is pronounced as *qaf* in most dialects of the Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), most regions of southern Yemen, It is articulated among the Druze community, which is primarily found in the occupied Golan in the far southwest of Syria, Suwayda in the south-east of Syria, the city of Azraq in the eastern desert of Jordan, in Lebanon, specifically in the areas east and south of Beirut, and in Palestine, where the concentration of this sect and its dialect lies in the northern areas,

particularly Mount Carmel. Members of the Alawite sect in northern Lebanon and the Syrian coast also pronounce the letter *qaf* in its original form, as do people in northern Iraq, namely Al Mousel: *qamar* قمر moon, *maqas* مقص scissors, and *sandouq* صندوق box.

2.5- **The letter *k*:** is the twenty-second letter of the Arabic alphabet. It is a voiced pharyngeal fricative, one of the silent letters, it is whispered plosive palatal sound, which is pronounced by raising the tip of the tongue towards the tip of the upper palate (the soft palate) and attaching it to it while raising the tip of the palate itself to block the airway from the nose. Then it presses on the air for a period of time and then releases the airway, causing a sonic explosion (Fayadh 1998, P. 100). It is pronounced with a clear, explosive sound similar to the pronunciation of the letter *qaf*. The letter *kaf* has the following writing patterns as shown in Table 5:

Table 5: written shapes of the letter *kaf* within the text in different positions

position	contextual form	example
Isolated	ك	أشواك /ʔaʃ'wa:k/, thornes
Initial	كـ	كبير /ka'bi:r/, Big
Middle	ـكـ	مكسور /mak'su:r/ Broken
Terminal	ـك	سلك /salak/ Wire

With the vowels or harakat it becomes *ka* (كَ) with fatha, *ku* (كُ) with damma, and *ki* (كِ) with kasra (Sobranews, 2018). The *Kaf* has different forms of pronunciation:

- 2.5.1 At the beginning and at the end of the word, it is pronounced *k* which is the original pronunciation among the civil dialects in the Levant, Egypt, Sudan, and the Arab Maghreb countries, such as the word *kitab* كتاب book *maktab* مكتب office, and the word *shubbak* شباك window.
- 2.5.2 In the rural dialects in the Levant, it is pronounced as *ch* at the beginning and end of the word. In the previous two examples, we find *chitab* شتاب book, *machtab* مشتب office and the word *shubbach* شباتش window, while in the Bedouin dialect, it changes to *sh* only at the end of the word, while the *k* at the beginning keeps its original pronunciation *k*.
- 2.5.3 The Gulf, Yemeni, and Iraqi dialects pronounce the letter *k* based on its position in the word; when it comes at the beginning or middle of the word, it is pronounced as *k*. However, when it appears at the end of the word, especially the addressee's *kaf*, it is changed as follows: the Iraqi dialect changes the *k* at the end of a word to *ch*, while Kuwaiti and Bahraini dialects pronounce it as *J*. The northern Saudi Arabian dialect changes it to *ts*, while the southern Saudi Arabian and Yemeni dialects pronounce it as *sh*.

Illustrative Dialogues

To demonstrate the pronunciation variations of specific letters across different Arabic dialects, the following dialogues are provided. These examples highlight how the same sentences can sound different when spoken by people from various regions.

1. Dialogue between a Kuwaiti and an Iraqi:

Kuwaiti: *alsalamu alaykum shukhbariJ?*

- Translation: Peace be upon you, how are you?

Iraqi: *waealayKum alsalam alhamudalaluh bikhayr. int shukhbaraCH?*

- Translation: Peace be upon you. Praise to God, I am fine. How are you?

Kuwaiti: *alhimudallluhu, washlun shughliJ wahliJ asahum Kuluhum tayibin?*

- Translation: Praise to God, how is your job and your family? I hope they are all good.

Iraqi: *wallah Kuluhum bikhayr wayadaeun bisalamiCH.*

- Translation: They are all good and praying for your safety.

2. The same dialogue between a Saudi from the north and a Yemeni:

Saudi: *alsalamu alaykum shukhbarTS?*

- Translation: Peace be upon you, how are you?

Yemeni: *waealayKum alsalam alhamudalaluh bikhayr. ant shukhbaraSH?*

- Translation: Peace be upon you. Praise to God, I am fine. How are you?

Saudi: *alhimudallluhu, washlun shughliTS w ahliTS asahum Kuluhum tayibin?*

- Translation: Praise to God, how is your job and your family? I hope they are all good.

Yemeni: *wallah Kuluhum bikhayr wayadaeun bisalamtiSH.*

- Translation: They are all good and praying for your safety.

3. A dialogue between a lady from the city and a lady from the village in Palestine

City lady: *kyfik? shw akhbareK?*

- Translation: How are you? How are things with you?

Village lady: *alhamdullela inty shw akhbariCH*

- Translation: Thanks to Allah, how are you?

City lady: *alhamdulela. bihkou el Dahab rakhis kTeer hal iyam, trouhy ma'e lilsuW' bidi ashtry iswara Dahab*

- Translation: Thanks to Allah, they said the gold is so cheap these days, I want to buy a gold bracelet, will you go with me to the market?

Village lady: *sahel el THahab rahkis kTheer, mashi brouh ma'ek lilsuk*

- Translation: right, the gold is so cheap. Ok I will go with you to the market.

City lady: *khalas itafa'Ana balaE'ky ba'ed se'aa bilsuW'*

- Translation: Ok, done. I will meet you in an hour in the market

Village lady: *itafaKna, ba'ed sa'a bniltiKy*

- Translation: done, I will see you in an hour

These examples illustrate how the pronunciation of certain letters, such as "Kaf" and "Jeem," can vary significantly between dialects. Noting the changes in pronunciation in capital letters, italics, and bold font helps clarify these differences.

Social and Geographic Influences

The diversity in Arabic dialects can be attributed to historical tribal separations, lack of unified trade and leadership, and varying external influences. Early Arabs' nomadic lifestyles and regional isolation fostered distinct linguistic traits. Contemporary researchers emphasize how these historical factors continue to shape modern dialects, as seen in the works of Ramadan (2022) and Al-Saleh (2021).

VIII- Conclusion

The literature reveals that the phonetic diversity of Arabic dialects is deeply rooted in the language's history and socio-geographic landscape. Understanding these variations provides

insights into the broader linguistic evolution of Arabic. This review underscores the importance of considering historical, social, and regional contexts when studying language variation.

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