DIALECT AS SHIBBOLETH ACROSS GENERATIONS IN POST-CIVIL WAR BEIRUT

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Abstract

This article examines the enduring role of dialect in Beirut shaped by the legacies of the Lebanese Civil War. Drawing on interviews with two generational cohorts, 30 participants over 50 who lived through the war and 30 participants aged 18–25 who were born after it, this study investigates how lexical and phonological variation is perceived and experienced across time. Findings demonstrate that dialect remains a salient marker of belonging and difference, but its consequences have shifted from life-or-death stakes to patterns of mockery, adaptation, and negotiation in the post-war era. By integrating Arabic sociolinguistics with theories of indexicality and accommodation, this study reveals how historical trauma and contemporary pressures intersect in shaping language attitudes.

Keywords: Dialects – Civil war – Lebanon – Generational differences

INTRODUCTION

Language is far more than a tool for exchanging words; it is a living symbol of identity, a marker of belonging, and, at times, a boundary that excludes (Bourdieu, 1991). In multilingual and diglossic societies, such as Lebanon, dialects often function as indicators of sectarian affiliations. These affiliations become particularly salient in times of conflict, when linguistic cues may determine survival, allegiance, or marginalization (Suleiman, 2004). The Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) provides a striking example of how language and dialect can become weaponized. Oral accounts repeatedly highlight how pronunciation, lexical choice, and phonological variation were mobilized at checkpoints to identify individuals' religious, political, or regional backgrounds and this sometimes led to fatal consequences.

The sociolinguistic landscape of post-war Beirut continues to reflect the legacy of this linguistic stratification. While globalization, urbanization, and multilingualism have encouraged dialect leveling and accommodation (Eckert, 2012), dialectal differences remain salient in shaping perceptions, mockery, and social evaluation. Older generations recall the consequences of dialect during the Civil War, while younger generations, though spared from the conflict, navigate dialectal stigma, linguistic insecurity, and the pressures of linguistic conformity in a cosmopolitan urban setting such as Beirut. Together, these generational perspectives show how the Lebanese Civil War continues to echo in the everyday sociolinguistic practices of Beirutis.

This study contributes to scholarship on language and conflict by documenting the lexical and phonological differences that shaped wartime and post-war experiences in Beirut, and by comparing how older and younger generations understand dialect as a marker of identity and social interaction. Using semi-structured interviews with individuals over 50 and between 18-25 years old, analyzed through NVivo, the research uncovers both continuity and change in the role of dialect across generations.

Despite extensive scholarship on Lebanon's sectarian divisions and the sociopolitical role of language in the Arab world (Suleiman, 2004; Joseph, 2010; Albirini, 2016), little empirical work has traced how the Lebanese Civil War's linguistic legacies continue to affect everyday experiences of dialect in contemporary Beirut. Existing studies often focus on macro-level descriptions of diglossia and code-switching in Arabic-speaking societies (Holes, 2004), yet the micro-level narratives of speakers themselves and how they experienced language as a marker of danger, belonging, ridicule, or pride remain underexplored.

Furthermore, the generational divide has not been systematically studied. While older Beirutis lived through a conflict in which dialect could dictate survival, younger generations experience dialect primarily through social judgments, mockery, and negotiation of identity in post-war Beirut. Without integrating both perspectives, sociolinguistic accounts risk overlooking the

intergenerational transmission of language ideologies and the ways in which historical trauma continues to shape linguistic attitudes today.

This research addresses that gap by analyzing how different age cohorts conceptualize dialect, recount experiences of linguistic discrimination, and evaluate their own and others' speech. It examines how dialect continues to function as a site of both integration and exclusion, reflecting broader social hierarchies in Lebanon's fragmented yet interconnected society.

This study is significant because it highlights how the conflict has become embedded in everyday linguistic practices and continues to influence social life across generations. By amplifying the voices of both older and younger Beirutis, it documents how the Civil War's linguistic shibboleths have transformed from life-and-death markers to sources of stigma, mockery, or adaptation in post-war settings. The findings of this study will contribute to broader debates in sociolinguistics on language ideology, indexicality, and linguistic discrimination, while also offering insights for understanding the long-term sociopolitical consequences of conflict on language.

This article is guided by the following central question: How do older and younger generations in Beirut perceive and experience dialectal variation, and in what ways do these perceptions reflect the sociopolitical legacies of the Lebanese Civil War?

The article proceeds as follows. The Literature Review situates the study within sociolinguistic research on language ideology, diglossia, and conflict, emphasizing the role of dialect as an index of social identity. The Methods section explains the participant selection, interview design, and NVivo-based qualitative analysis. The Results and Discussion section presents the findings from both generational cohorts, highlighting how lexical and phonological variations were mobilized during the Civil War and how their meanings evolved in post-war Beirut. Finally, the Conclusion synthesizes these findings to reflect on the enduring sociopolitical significance of dialect in shaping identity, belonging, and memory across generations.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between language, identity, and social hierarchy has long been a central concern of sociolinguistic inquiry. Scholars have consistently shown that linguistic forms are not neutral conveyors of meaning but powerful social resources through which belonging, exclusion, and difference are negotiated. In contexts marked by multilingualism, mobility, and historical conflict, the risks of linguistic variation become particularly pronounced. Lebanon provides a compelling case for examining these dynamics, as dialects not only reflect regional and sectarian affiliations but also carry the weight of historical trauma rooted in the Civil War (1975-1990). To situate the present study, this review brings together theoretical and empirical contributions on language ideology, diglossia and Arabic variation, conflict and accommodation, and

accent-based discrimination. Together, these strands of scholarship provide the foundation for analyzing how dialect continues to function as a marker of identity and social positioning in Beirut across generational lines.

A large body of sociolinguistic work establishes language as a social resource for performing identities and negotiating group boundaries. Foundational accounts of language ideology explain how beliefs about "proper" or "authentic" speech naturalize social hierarchies (Blommaert, 2006). Identity is not a fixed attribute but an interactional accomplishment: speakers position themselves and others through linguistic forms that index place, class, gender, sect, and political stance (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Agha (2007) further clarifies how recurrent links between forms (such as lexical items and phonological variants), and social identities become publicly recognizable styles. Within this frame, dialect is not merely a regional code but a repertoire of indexical cues that can be mobilized for affiliation, distinction, or exclusion (Doreleijers & Swanenberg, 2023).

Arabic-speaking societies are classically described as diglossic, with functionally differentiated High (H) and Low (L) varieties (Ferguson, 1959). Subsequent work has emphasized the complexity beyond a simple H/L split, highlighting rich Arabic variation across geography, religion, class, and mobility (Albirini, 2016). Dialect choice and code-switching among Arabic, French, and English in Lebanon are well documented as resources for stance and identity, particularly in urban centers like Beirut (Joseph, 2010; Suleiman, 2004). Within the Lebanese context, fine-grained phonological and lexical cues, such as reflexes of /q/, vowel quality, or representative lexemes, carry robust social meanings tied to sectarian identities.

The transformation of linguistic difference into a high-stakes social filter is a well-recognized phenomenon in conflict settings (Chriost, 2003). Accommodation Communication Theory (ACT) provides a lens for understanding how speakers actively reshape their linguistic output to gain approval, reduce social distance, or avoid sanctions (Giles, 2016). In post-war Beirut's cosmopolitan spaces, accommodation often means diminishing marked regional features or adopting local forms. Over longer time scales, repeated accommodation contributes to dialect leveling and the emergence of urban koinés (Kerswill, 2008).

Classic sociolinguistic insights into indexicality help explain how ordinary variation becomes a "shibboleth," a test through which belonging and threat are inferred (Lippi-Green, 2012). Arab scholarship details how language is entangled with nationalist and sectarian projects and can be mobilized in political struggles (Suleiman, 2004). While much research studies broad ideologies, fewer studies follow the pragmatics of checkpoints and everyday encounters where speech becomes evidence, and misrecognition can have life-altering consequences. Beyond overt conflict, everyday evaluation of accents and dialect features reproduce social hierarchies. Work on

"accentism" and linguistic discrimination shows that listeners routinely attribute competence, trustworthiness, or status based on phonological and lexical cues (Woolridge *et al.*, 2024). In multilingual settings, the circulation of prestige ideologies can stigmatize vernaculars while valorizing standard or cosmopolitan varieties (Farr & Song, 2011).

Bringing these strands together, the present work contributes three advances. First, it documents with fine detail how specific Lebanese phonological and lexical variants were operationalized as shibboleths during the Civil War. Second, it offers an intergenerational comparison that traces how wartime language ideologies persist, soften, or shift in post-war Beirut, linking trauma memory to contemporary accent evaluation and leveling. Third, it integrates Arabic sociolinguistics with theories of indexicality to explain why tiny phonetic differences continue to "do" large social work and why speakers strategically recalibrate their speech in response.

2. METHODS

Participants

This study involved in-depth interviews with 60 participants, divided evenly between two cohorts: 30 individuals aged over 50 and 30 individuals aged between 18 and 25. The older cohort was selected because they had lived through the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), providing firsthand accounts of how language and dialect operated during the conflict. The younger cohort, by contrast, had no direct experience of the war but were included to capture how post-war generations perceive and negotiate dialectal variation. Both male and female participants were represented, and all currently reside and/or work in Beirut.

Design

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to balance comparability with openness to participants' narratives. Five guiding questions addressed (1) comfort with one's own dialect, (2) personal linguistic experiences, (3) experiences of others' dialects, (4) recollections of incidents during the Civil War where language functioned as a marker of identity or a weapon, and (5) perceptions of changes in dialect awareness since the Civil War. While all five questions were posed to the older cohort, the younger participants were asked only the first three, as the latter two were not applicable to their lived context.

Interviews were conducted informally and conversationally to encourage candid responses. With participants' consent, they were recorded as WhatsApp voice notes, which provided clear audio quality. The questions were posed primarily in Lebanese Arabic at the request of participants, ensuring both comfort and authenticity of expression. All interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo for systematic qualitative analysis. Each interview was treated as a separate document to facilitate coding and retrieval. An inductive approach was employed: open coding first identified significant words, phrases, and passages relevant to the research questions, which were then refined through axial coding to establish relationships and groupings among the codes. This process produced broader thematic categories, enabling a deeper understanding of how participants articulated their linguistic experiences.

To support interpretation, NVivo's visualization tools (including mind maps, charts, and models) were employed to illustrate relationships between themes and highlight patterns across the two cohorts. These methods allowed for a comprehensive account of how dialectal differences are remembered, experienced, and evaluated across generations in Beirut.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the interview data reveals the complex ways in which dialect operates across generational lines in Beirut. To capture these dynamics, the interviews were coded into major categories reflecting both structural and experiential dimensions of language: lexical variation, phonological variation, linguistic experiences during the Civil War, and linguistic experiences in the post-war era. This categorization allows us to trace how fine-grained linguistic features, such as individual words or phonological realizations, became socially consequential in times of conflict, and how their meanings persist or shift in contemporary contexts. The following sections present these findings in detail, beginning with accounts of lexical and phonological differences during the war, then moving to broader reflections on the role of dialect in shaping identity, discrimination, and adaptation after the conflict. This is followed by an analysis of younger participants' perspectives, which provides insight into how post-war generations experience dialect in everyday interactions.

The interviews were coded by four categories: lexical differences, phonological differences, linguistic experiences during the war, and linguistic experiences after the war. To begin with, there were only seven references (3.79% coverage) during the interviews that spoke of lexical differences amongst Lebanese speakers. The first instance is an interviewee saying يا أخي [jə əxe] instead of يا خيّ [jə xəje] for "my brother" to a militant at the checkpoint in Saifi and was detained for that. The second is an interviewee who declared that he used to use Palestinian words in his daily life like آه [ɑ] instead of إيه [e] for "yes" and إيش مالك [eʃ mælək] instead of شو بيك [ʃu bek] for "what is wrong with you?". The third was a story of a Muslim woman from Chiyah who used to visit a Christian family and used to say يا مشحرة [jə mʃəħərə] for "oh my" (roughly translated) when a bad event happens. She was consistently told to refrain from using it so she would not get caught. The fourth was an interviewee who

stated that she does not use the same words that her Beiruti grandma used. The fifth reference was to an interviewee who said that they taught their Syrian sister-in-law to use unmarked Lebanese words instead of stigmatized Syrian words. She used to say أطراميز [ətrəmiz] instead of مرطبان [mortben] for "jar" and شعلي [ʃʕele] instead of ضوّي [dəwe] for "turn on". The sixth reference is for an interviewee who said that she lost all of her Beiruti words. She recollects words used by her older sister like سرموجة [sərmuʒe] instead of مشاية [məʃeje] for "slipper". The last reference is a term used by a Christian woman which is يا عدرا [jə ʕədrə] for "oh Virgin Mary". She was advised not to say it when militants were crashing into buildings.

Moreover, twelve references were calculated for phonological differences (6.48% coverage). These phonological differences caused trouble during the Civil War. One difference is أهلين [əhlen] instead of أهلًا [əhlən] for "hello". Another is the famous example of saying بنْدورة [bəndorə] instead of بنَدورة [bənədurə] for "tomato". This example was mentioned three times in the interviews. People were detained for using the first which resembled the Palestinian variety. Another example is saying بحُب [bħob] instead of بحِب [bħıb] for "I love" and طرِئ [təreʔ] instead of طريئ [təriʔ] for "street". Moreover, a participant stated that they used to receive remarks for saying خُبِز [xobez] instead of خِبِز [xebez] for "bread" while the first is spoken by Mousaitbeh inhabitants. The interviewees were mocked for having other phonological differences. One said that there are obvious differences between Muslim and Christian pronunciation where the latter would say بِرّاد [berɑd] and the first would say بَرّاد [bərɑd] for "fridge". One interviewee was mocked for saying بَيضتَين [bɑjdtɑjn] instead of بيضتِين [bɑjdten] for "two eggs." Druze were also mocked for using the ق [q] instead of أ [æ]. Lastly, beside the story of "tomato" that occurred on multiple checkpoints in Lebanon, one interviewee retells the story of "number nine" at Madfoun checkpoint. He says that the Lebanese Forces used to ask the army men in the bus to say "number nine" in the dialect. Those who said تسعِ [tısʕe] would be from Tripoli and who said تسعو [tısʕo] were from Zgharta. If they said those two variations instead of تِسعَة [tısʕɑ], then they would be either detained or directly killed in front of the bus.

According to the interviews, during the Lebanese Civil War, language played a critical role at various checkpoints and encounters. For instance, a participant was detained at a civil checkpoint for lying about their origin, while another's Christian uncles were arrested despite their religious identity. Dialects often determined one's fate, as seen when someone from East Beirut traveled to Zahle without issues, whereas others faced arrests based on the pronunciation of words like 'banadoura.' People from different regions, such as West and East Beirut, experienced varied levels of safety. In one case, a person's use of a specific greeting led to being beaten up for being mistaken as Palestinian. Tragically, a family suffered a massacre, and another participant faced fear when their friend jokingly threatened to expose their religion. Language betrayed one's origin, often leading to severe

consequences. During ceasefires, creative methods like removing hijabs and using code phrases helped ensure safety. The role of dialects in identifying and discriminating individuals was a recurrent theme, with militants and civilians alike using language to determine allegiance and origins, often with deadly outcomes.

After the Lebanese Civil War, people's experiences with language continued to reflect the deep impacts of their dialects and accents. Some individuals faced ridicule for having mixed dialects, while others found themselves in uncomfortable situations due to past conflicts, such as one person who discovered their boss was the sole survivor from the family responsible for killing their brothers. Dialects evolved within families, with older generations retaining different speech patterns than younger ones. Inter-sect marriages and changing relationships influenced these dialects further, leading to more acceptance and blending of different accents. However, remnants of discrimination persisted, as one person mentioned their son struggled to find a job because of his dialect. Others adapted their speech to blend in better, while some faced mockery for specific phrases. The post-war period saw increased socialization and the integration of English and French into everyday language, which helped dissolve some of the dialectal differences. In academic settings, people could still identify others' origins based on their speech, indicating that despite some progress, language remained a significant marker of identity.

On the other hand, the 30 interviews with individuals aged between 18 to 25 years old were analyzed through NVivo. The 10 most frequent words in all 30 interviews were: dialect (dialect or dialects) with a count of 64, speak (speak, speaking, or speaks), person, personality, people, remark (remark, remarked, remarks), way, word, and comfortable (Figure 2). The interviews were coded into three different categories: comfort with one's dialect, personal linguistic experiences, and others' linguistic experiences. All 30 interviews mentioned a degree of comfort with one's own dialect whether it is a negative or positive relation. 23 of the interviewees expressed comfort with their spoken Lebanese dialect and some even felt proud speaking it. 1 interviewee was not comfortable at all. 2 interviewees felt insecure and self-conscious. The same individual expressed that they needed to code-switch or adapt their dialect when speaking to certain groups.

24 of the interviewees expressed a neutral relationship with their dialects, becoming more accepting of their own variety, after struggling with discomfort as younger individuals. According to the interviews, most of the interviewees have received negative comments regarding their dialects at least once in their lifetimes. Almost 20 participants recalled the remarks that they were given. 1 person said that teachers told him he sounded too 'Beiruti' with his rounded vowels. Another said they received comments for using a different lexical term for the term 'cat' in Lebanese Arabic. On the other hand, 4 participants stated that they have only received remarks from individuals who came from other

countries. Those comments were relatively positive. They were told that the dialect sounded nice, rich, and more 'feminine' than other Arabic dialects. The remaining 10 participants stated that they have never received comments on the way they spoke. 21 respondents commented that they came from mixed backgrounds and use words that originate from different areas of Lebanon such as the South or the Jabal, so they had to level their dialects in Beirut because of the negative comments that they have received.

In addition, most interviewees (n=24) recall instances in their lives when they heard others being mocked or ridiculed for the way they spoke. They have heard individuals give comments on certain words or sounds such as the usage of the /q/ sound by those from the Jabal. 4 of them stated that these comments were light-hearted and were not meant to be offensive. 9 stated that they would also take part in ridiculing the dialect of the other, in a friendly manner. These participants were asked about their reaction to the comments they heard and the situation that was put in. The answers varied. 12 said that they did not comment, and they did not see that it was their place to do so. 7 said that they would either tell them to stop or support the dialect speaker because their dialect is what made them special and unique. The remaining 5 interviewees stated that they have never heard anyone make fun of another's dialect. In conclusion, the interviews with young Lebanese speakers reveal the relationship they have with their dialects, shaped by both internal perceptions and external judgments. While a significant number of 28 interviewees expressed comfort or even pride in speaking their dialect, 9 felt compelled to adapt their speech based on social expectations, highlighting the complex role of dialect in social identity. Experiences with negative feedback highlight how specific linguistic features, such as regionally marked sounds or words, can attract both criticism and, occasionally, light-hearted mockery. However, some positive feedback, particularly from individuals outside Lebanon, provided validation, suggesting an appreciation for the uniqueness of Lebanese Arabic from an external perspective. These varied responses indicate a tension between the desire to retain a unique dialectal identity and the pressures of linguistic conformity, especially within the cosmopolitan setting of Beirut.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that dialect in Beirut is not merely a matter of linguistic variation but a deeply rooted index of social identity, historical trauma, and generational negotiation. Through the narratives of older speakers, phonological and lexical markers are seen as high-stakes shibboleths, capable of determining survival during the Lebanese Civil War. In contrast, younger speakers, who were spared from the direct violence of checkpoints, still encounter dialect as a site of evaluation, mockery, and self-conscious adaptation. This generational divide highlights the persistence of language ideologies shaped by conflict, even as the sociolinguistic environment has shifted toward urban accommodation and cosmopolitan hybridity.

The findings highlight both continuity and change. On one hand, wartime memories reveal the lethal potential of dialect as a boundary marker, reminding us that language can be weaponized when political and sectarian divisions become acute. On the other hand, younger participants' accounts suggest that while dialect continues to index belonging and difference, its consequences are now mediated through social perceptions, teasing, and pressures toward leveling rather than immediate threats to survival. These intergenerational perspectives make clear that the linguistic legacies of conflict echo long after the guns fall silent, shaping everyday practices of speech, evaluation, and identity.

By situating Lebanese Arabic within broader theories of indexicality, language ideology, and accommodation, this study contributes to an understanding of how linguistic choices both reproduce and transform social hierarchies. It also shows the importance of documenting personal narratives, as they reveal the lived dimensions of language. Ultimately, dialect in Beirut continues to be a site of both vulnerability and resilience. This is a reminder of the Civil War's enduring impact and a testament to speakers' ongoing negotiation of identity in a fragmented yet interconnected society.

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