

ACCENT LEVELLING AND MAINTENANCE IN MASLAWI ARABIC:

A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

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Abstract

Levelling of localised linguistic features of some Iraqi Arabic varieties has been noted for at least half a century but an investigation of such a process is still lacking. This paper reports initial results of a larger study on the variety of Arabic spoken in Mosul, Iraq (henceforth MA). It attempts to assess whether such a process is occurring in this dialect, the traditional features of which are reported to be superseded by supralocal variants.

This paper examines two variables: /q/ and /ɔ:/. The selection of these two variables was based on a pilot study carried out along the lines of the main study. This small-scale study revealed that the realisational patterns of these two variables might be related to the non-linguistic parameters intended for the study, age, gender and social class, and thus be revealing with regard to the phonological behaviour of Maslawi accent.

Results show that while MA appears to be maintaining some traditional features, it shows traces of levelling in others. [q] is almost categorically preserved by speakers of MA stratified by gender, age and social class, whereas [ɔ:] is receding in the face of the standard variant [u:]. The paper suggests that the social meaning attached to [q] and its status within the community of MA seem to inform its preservation since this particular sound, at least linguistically, defines the community of MA. The other variable (i.e. [ɔ:]), which shows signs of levelling, lacks this social strength, hence becomes more susceptible to being supplanted.

Young speakers' low use of [ɔ:] relative to their older counterparts, coupled with a rise in younger speakers' usage of supralocal [u:], is thus indicative of accent levelling.

1. Introduction

One of the widely attested processes that the strand of research on phonological variation and change has brought to the fore is dialect levelling. Dialect (more appropriate in this study, accent) levelling, or supralocalisation, is the reduction of localised linguistic features of a certain dialect in favour of equivalents of a broader regional usage. In this sense, the features that differentiate one dialect from another gradually decrease or, in some cases, completely disappear (Trudgill, 1986, p. 98; Hinskens, 1993, p. 11; Williams and Kerswill, 1999, p. 149).

Wilson (2010) notes that while research on variation and change has been actively pursued over half a century (Weinreich, 1953), the theme of dialect contact and resultant levelling has become a focus of research and discussion mainly with reference to British English following Trudgill's work *Dialects in contact* (1986). Riders to the theme of levelling such as Trudgill (1986), Kerswill (1996 a) and Britain (1997) have extensively examined this phenomenon and the changes triggered by dialect contact, which is in turn brought about by the social upheavals that have been taking place in Britain since the turn of the twentieth century. The studies of those scholars have served as a springboard for subsequent studies to follow suit in other parts of the world. This took the shape of a number of studies mimicking the British pattern to include many parts of Europe such as Norway, e.g. Kerswill (1996 b), Hilton (2010), Røynealand (2009); France, e.g. Armstrong (2001), Temple (2001), Esch

(2002), Hornsby (2002), Pooley (2002), Lodge (2004), Boughton (2005); and the Arab world, e.g. Gibson (2002), Manfredi (2012) to name but a few. Although this phenomenon has to date not been assessed in Iraq, impressionistic evidence has been accumulating over the past years suggesting that some traditional Iraqi Arabic varieties are losing ground to dominant ones. This paper attempts to account for the alleged levelling of a traditional variety that has received little attention in the literature —Maslawi Arabic.

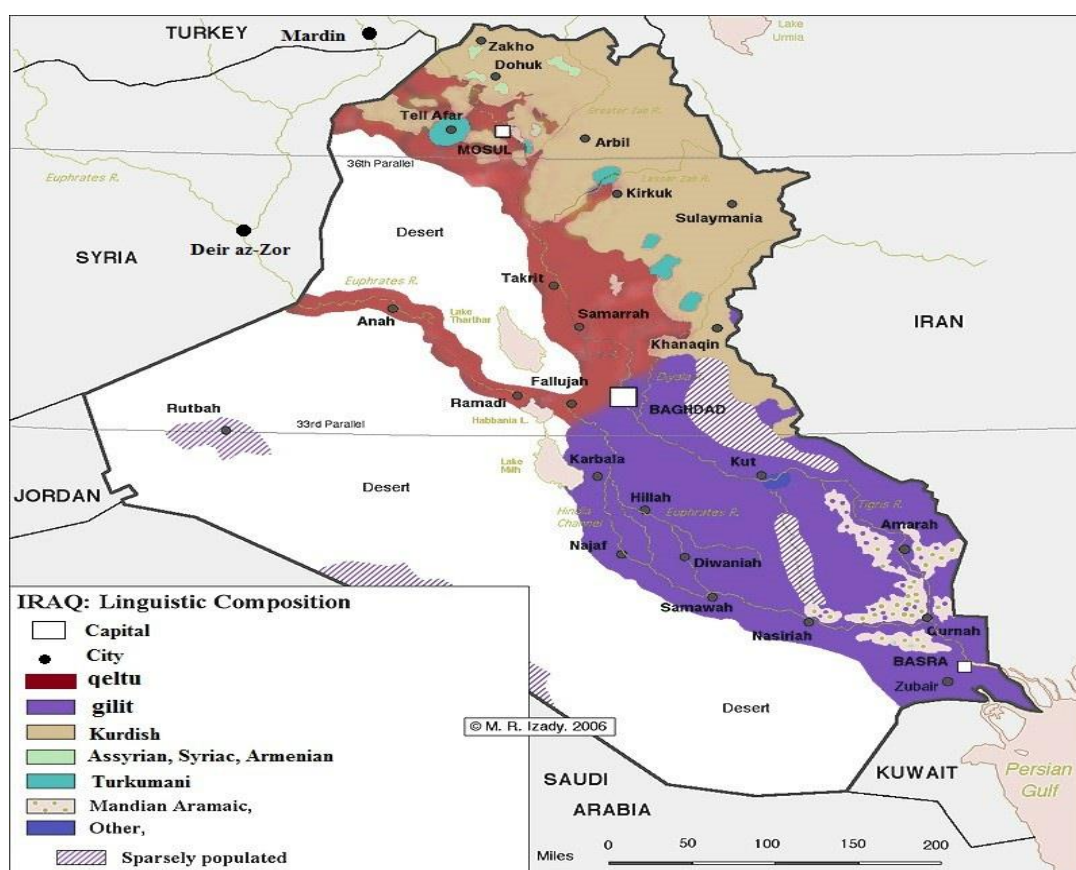
2. The linguistic landscape of Iraq

Linguistically speaking, Iraq is a true mosaic with a heterogeneous population of ethnic and religious diversity. Corresponding to this diversity is a contiguous geographical expanse that is home to a range of different spoken and written languages and dialects, with Arabic as the majority language of the country. Iraq is also home to minority languages such as Kurdish, Turkmen, and Neo-Aramaic. Iraqi Arabic (henceforth IA), also known as Mesopotamian Arabic, is the major variety spoken in the Mesopotamian basin of Iraq as well as adjacent parts of neighbouring Syria, Turkey and Iran.

Blanc (1964) classified the dialects of Iraqi Arabic into two main groups: *gilit* and *qeltu* dialect groups. This linguistic classification has ever since been the tradition in the literature on IA. The umbrella terms *qeltu* and *gilit* are based on the realisation of the 1st person singular past tense of the verb ‘say’ by the natives of these two dialect groups. The *qeltu* group is classified into three further groups: Tigris, Euphrates, and Anatolian (Jastrow, 1978). This group includes, along with MA, ethnically-based dialects such as Christian Baghdadi Arabic (CBA) and Jewish Baghdadi Arabic (JBA). The *qeltu* dialects are spoken by Muslims living north of Baghdad (e.g. Mosul and Tikrit) and of Christians and Jews in the entire dialect area,

which includes parts of Baghdad up to the north-eastern and southern parts of Syria and Turkey respectively. On the other hand, *gilit* dialects are spoken in the central and southern regions of Iraq as well as parts of Iran (e.g. Ahwaz). *Gilit* dialects are akin to Najdi Arabic; a variety spoken in north-eastern Arabia (Biadisy et al., 2009, p. 55). Holes (2007, p. 124) remarks that the dividing line between these two main dialect groups (as illustrated in Figure 1) runs approximately from the towns of Falluja on the Euphrates River and Samarra on the Tigris.

Figure 1: The distribution of *qeltu* & *gelet* dialects in Iraq and beyond (Based on Collin, 2009, p. 250).



3. Maslawi Arabic

MA is the native Arabic variety of the people of the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, 352 north of Baghdad. MA has descended almost unadulterated from the pre-Islamic times with

linguistic traces harking back to the Mesopotamian era (Jastrow, 1978; Thanoun, 2010). Mosul boasts a multi-ethnic population that includes Arabs, who form the majority, as well as Kurds, Turkmen and Shabak. The MA speaking community is locally pigeonholed as *qiqu* [qi:qu] or *qhah* [qħah]—shibboleths describing the prototypical natives of MA. Both terms are based on the use of voiceless uvular stop [q], a well-known dialectal feature of *qeltu*. Geographically, MA is largely found in the central area of Mosul, which is divided by the Tigris river. The two sides of Mosul are locally known as *Sahel Al-ayman* ‘Right bank’ and *Sahel Al-ayasar* ‘left bank’. (See Figure 2 below).

4. Evidence of dialect levelling in MA

Although previous studies on dialect levelling in Mosul are lacking, early remarks have shown that *qeltu* dialects, not least MA, are being lost or diluted in that some of the traditional linguistic features of this group are being supplanted by supralocal ones (e.g. *gilit*) (Palva, 1983; Jastrow, 2006). The quotes below are separated by more than two decades, yet they both concurred with the occurrence of levelling in *qeltu* speaking areas, including Mosul. Palva (1983: 101) states:

Due to the radical change in the modern society, local dialects are today exposed to substantial linguistic interference. On the other hand, *qeltu* dialects represent almost everywhere a geographically recessive type. In Iraq and in the Syrian town Der iz-Zor they are losing ground to the dominant *gilit* dialects, in Anatolia to Turkish and Kurdish. In many places in Anatolia, the socioreligious minorities have already become extinct or have left the area, and many dialects will become extinct during the next generation.

Collin (2009) also noted in his personal communication with scholars like Farida Abu-Haidar and Clive Holes that levelling is occurring in Mosul as well as other cities in northern Iraq and that the boundary between *qeltu* and *gilit* is drifting further up to the north. Collin quotes Abu Haidar (2007) stating:

Tikrit was once a *qeltu*-speaking town. Nowadays, the majority speak gelet. Mosul is going that way too. Kirkuk pre-1979 was predominantly Turkoman-speaking. By the time of the invasion in 2003, the Turkomans had become a minority and you could find all kinds of southern and central gelet varieties throughout Kirkuk.

In addition, anecdotal observations and commentaries on the decreasing use of the variety are often made by locals of MA. The late Broadcast journalist Wathiq al-Ghadanfari presented a television show in MA intended to revive images of Mosul's heritage and its dialect. Al-Ghadanfari noted that the variety is decreasing in use, largely by the young generation, and is no longer so common even within areas that were hitherto Maslawi speaking. Elyas (2013) argues that Maslawis are "fearing the extinction of their dialect", attributing this to a variety of reasons (discussed in the next section). Citing similar reasons, Al-damluji (2014) claims that more "foreign" variants are penetrating into MA, which seems to be "fighting for survival" amid the influence of the speech norms of those people who have crept into Mosul and induced a demographic change in its society.

5. Why is Levelling happening in Mosul?

Levelling is a contact-induced process that is often hypothesised to stem from a number of precipitating factors such as increased mobility of people, demographic change and immigration in a particular area. As such, people speaking different varieties come into

contact with each other and a linguistic accommodatory behaviour unfolds as interlocutors seek to maximise their communication by rifting the linguistic gap that exists between them (Giles *et al.*, 1973).

Typical factors of dialect levelling, aforementioned above, have been reported to be taking place in Mosul. These factors have altered the social equilibrium in Iraq in general and more particularly in Mosul during the past few decades. The changes brought about by such factors have collectively impinged on the community of Mosul, which has hitherto been cohesive.

Chief among the precipitating factors of levelling in Mosul has been immigration. Mosul has seen an influx of newcomers including workers, farmers, and others who have come to Mosul especially from its rural hinterland as well as from other parts of Iraq. As such, it has led to the fragmentation of closely-knit social networks and the burgeoning of weak ties, which are ideal conditions in which linguistic changes occur (Milroy and Milroy, 1985). Another linguistic corollary of the social network theory of Milroy & Milroy (*ibid*) is that tightly-knit networks, on the other hand, tend to maintain localised linguistic forms. These networks bond the community and thus promote perpetuating distinct linguistic features especially those indexing identity (Wolfram and Thomas, 2008, p. 39).

With the above in mind, the change in the demographic complexion of Mosul provided a context in which Maslawis have come into contact with people speaking different varieties. As a result, linguistic accommodation, visibly on the part of Maslawis towards the newcomers' speaking habits, has developed to the extent that Maslawis claim that their variety is now absorbing more non-MA linguistic elements, notably by the young generation (Al-damluji, 2014).

Another important factor is urbanisation, which has been one of the main social changes that developed in the Arab world during the twentieth century (Miller, 2004, p. 177). The effects of urbanisation were chiefly felt in the oil-producing countries like Iraq, which has witnessed an economic boom that led to the urbanisation of large areas (Bassiouney, 2009, p. 114). This must have its own linguistic consequences in those areas. In Mosul, many new neighbourhoods have been built on previously-uninhabited areas, mostly on the east bank of the city.

6. This study

This paper reports initial findings of a more comprehensive study on the phonological patterns and trajectory of change that exist in the Arabic variety spoken in Mosul, the third largest city in Iraq. It looks at two traditional variables in MA: /q/ and /ɖ:/. It assesses whether the process of levelling is occurring in these two sounds and explain why it is (not) happening.

6.1.The variables

1) /q/

/q/ is one of the interesting sounds in Arabic given its phonetic, phonological and sociolinguistic implications across the Arabic-speaking areas (Al-Ani, 1976; Hachimi, 2005). In Iraq, it acts as one of the main features that differentiate IA dialects, chiefly with regards to two of its variants that exist in IA: [q] and [g]. This is typified by the use of the voiced velar stop [g] as being characteristic of the *gilit* group while the voiceless uvular stop [q] is a defining feature of the sedentary *qeltu* dialects. As a *qeltu* variety, MA retains MSA voiceless unaspirated stop [q] in all environments, while *gilit* has several variants of this variable along with [g] in certain distributions (Al-Ani 1976).

2) /ɔ:/

The phonetic quality of this variable in MA is a mid-back rounded long vowel [ɔ:] as in [tayyɔ:qa] ‘breakfast’. Abu-Haidar (1991, p. 27) remarks that this feature has been well documented in the literature with Oussani (1901, p. 101) being the first scholar to report to it in CBA, followed by Blanc (1964: 41). Jastrow (1978: 63) also reported it in Anatolian dialects, as well as in the spoken Arabic of Mosul. It has also been reported in other *qeltu* varieties like the Jewish dialects in Erbil, north of Iraq (Khan *et al.*, 2011, p. 913). This sound occurs in the following contexts:

a. Vowel Lowering

This variant occurs when MSA as well as IA’s [u:] is rendered into a lower quality vowel [ɔ:] in the environment of emphatic, uvular and pharyngeal consonants, as in e.g. ‘stooḥ’ [s^ʔt^ʕu:ḥ] v [s^ʔt^ʕɔ:ḥ] ‘roof’ (Jastrow, 1994, p. 120).

b. Vocalisation of rhotics

[ɔ:] also results from the vocalisation of /r/ in certain contexts. When /r/ when preceded by /u/ or /a/, and is in the contiguity of velar or pharyngeal consonants, it is realised as a back rounded vowel [ɔ:] with a compensatory lengthening (Ibrahim, 1969, p. 259), as in the following examples.

MSA	MA	<i>Gilit</i>	Gloss
[ɣurba:l]	[ɣɔ:br:l]	[ɣurbɪ:l]	‘sieve’
[ʔarbaʕi:n]	[ɔ:baʕi:n]	[ʔar ^ʕ baʕi:n]	‘Forty’

c. Monophthongisation

/ɔ:/ also occurs as a result of monophthongisation of MSA diphthong [au] to [ɔ:] Khan et al. (2011, p. 913), especially in medial and final positions, as in [θaur] → [θɔ:ɹ] ‘Ox’.

d. Loanwords

This variant can also be found in loanwords from other languages, for instance [sɔ:pa] “stove”. It should be noted here that both *qeltu* and *gilit* have this variant in environments (c) and (d), while (a) and (b) are exclusive contexts of [ɔ:] in *qeltu*.

7. Methodology

This paper followed the variationist framework pioneered by William Labov and colleagues in 1960s. This tradition seeks to explore the possible contribution of a constellation of factors in shaping the trajectories of phonological change of language varieties. As such, this study attempted to examine the phonological change hypothesised to be occurring in MA and to discern the factors that govern the phonological patterns currently in use in MA.

7.1. Dataset

The dataset used for this study was composed of a set of recordings collected from 16 speakers of MA. A total of 539 tokens of /q/, and 480 tokens for /ɔ:/ of the environments (a) and (b) have been coded. A maximum of three iterations of the same lexical item that contains

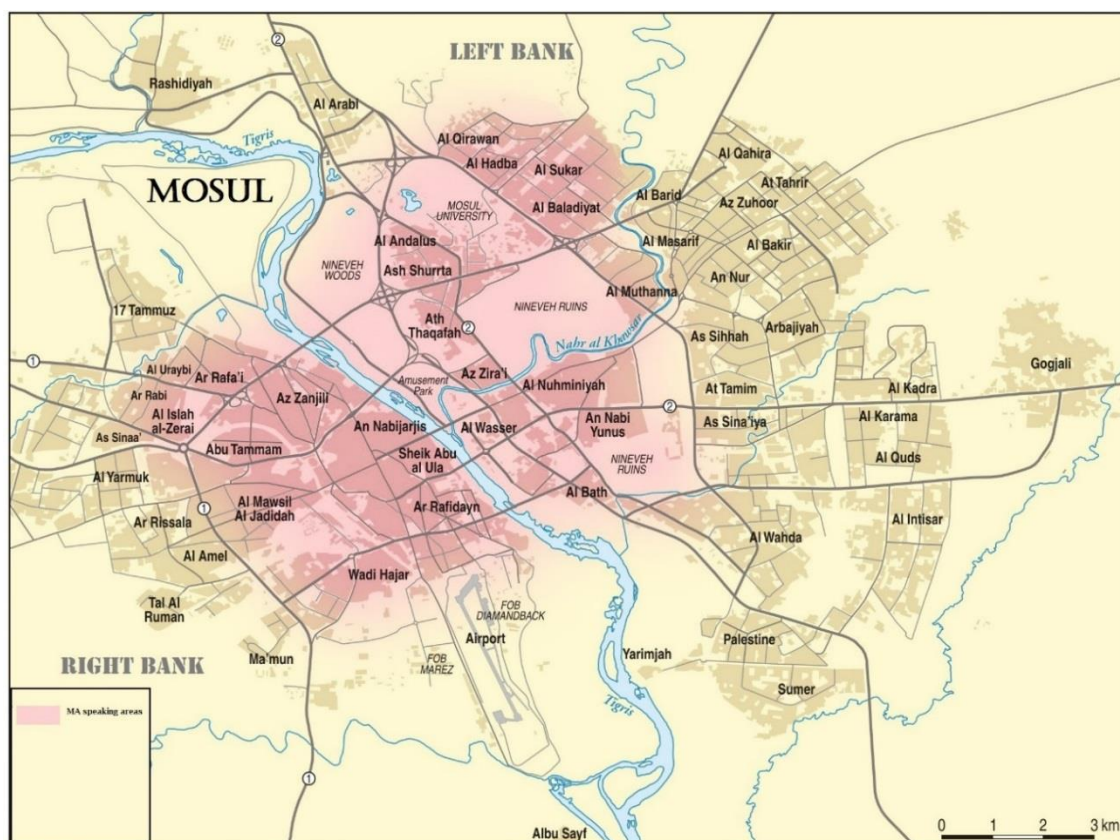
the variables was imposed to ensure the data were not skewed. The bulk of these recordings consisted of free, informal talk generated by using informal sociolinguistic interviews. The sociolinguistic interview is one of the mainstream techniques of data collection used by variationists (Milroy & Gordon 2008: 61). A typical sociolinguistic interview usually contains questions relating to topics such as demography, community, neighbourhood, etc. and gradually develops into other preferable issues (Tagliamonte, 2006, p. 39). The remainder of the of recordings included speech obtained using other data elicitation techniques such map task, and picture-naming.

7.2. Speakers

Born and raised in Mosul, the 16 informants had come to the UK for education and business purposes. The informant sample was subdivided by three speaker variables: gender (10 males and 6 females), age and social class. The speakers were grouped into three age cohorts representing three main life stages: youth (18-30), Middle age (30-45), and old (+45). Six young speakers were recruited while five speakers were recorded for each of the middle and old age cohorts. The speakers belong to two social classes prevailing in the MA-speaking community: lower middle class and Middle class. The speakers for this study were selected using the “friend of a friend” technique (Milroy, 1987, p. 66). It involved asking a local community member to whom the nature of the research is disclosed to suggest suitable informants, who would, in turn, suggest other candidates from their acquaintances to participate in the study. Thus, the sample snowballed until the required number of informants was reached. The 16 speakers recruited for the study hail from neighbourhoods where MA is

typically spoken. These neighbourhoods are centred in the old alleys in central Mosul on both banks of the city (Figure 2).

Figure 2: a map showing the MA speaking area of Mosul



8. Results

/q/

It is immediately clear from the figures in Figure 3 that there is a preservation of the traditional [q] and this obtains across the age brackets upon which the speakers were grouped. Although the score of [q] for the older speakers is slightly higher than that of their younger counterparts, it is still not reliable enough to confidently state that there is a change in this variable. A one-way ANOVA analysis for age and social class followed by a *post hoc* analysis

for age groups were performed and the obtained results revealed no statistically significant effects (Tables 1, 2, and 3).

[g] occurred only in few words like *garayib* ‘relatives’. This realisation was categorical by all the speakers indicating that it is adopted from *gilit* that way since no other lexical items denoting a similar meaning appear to be available in the lexicon of MA. The rest of the tokens realised with [g] may have resulted from occasional accommodation to the interlocutor (the researcher) who is a native of *gilit*. Observer’s paradox (Labov, 1966) effects, which involve that when speakers know their speech behaviour is being recorded, they tend to modify it in a way to project a “correct” or “prestigious” image of it. These effects are often unavoidable but can be minimised by making the participants get immersed in a long informal conversation until they ‘forget’ they are being recorded (Watts, 1998, p. 101).

Figure 3: The realisation of [q] and [g] by age.

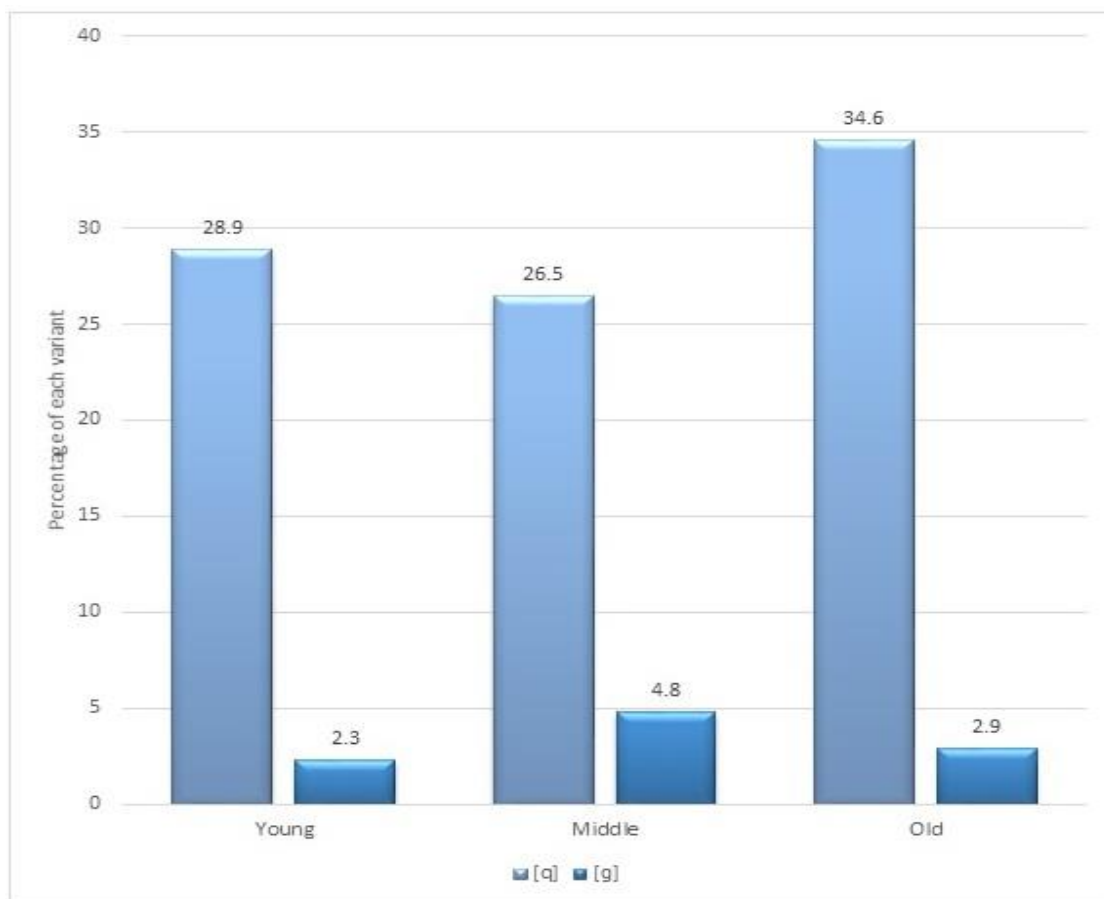


Table 1: One-way ANOVA for age.

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
[q]	Between Groups	18.667	2	9.333	.771	.483
	Within Groups	157.333	13	12.103		
	Total	176.000	15			
[g]	Between Groups	18.667	2	9.333	.771	.483
	Within Groups	157.333	13	12.103		
	Total	176.000	15			

Table 2: One-way ANOVA for social class.

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
[q]	Between Groups	9.000	1	9.000	.754	.400
	Within Groups	167.000	14	11.929		
	Total	176.000	15			
[g]	Between Groups	9.000	1	9.000	.754	.400
	Within Groups	167.000	14	11.929		
	Total	176.000	15			

Table 3: Post hoc analysis for age.

Multiple Comparisons							
Tukey HSD							
Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
[q]	Young	Middle	2.40000	2.20023	.536	-3.4096	8.2096
		Old	.13333	2.10656	.998	-5.4289	5.6956
	Middle	Young	-2.40000	2.20023	.536	-8.2096	3.4096
		Old	-2.26667	2.10656	.545	-7.8289	3.2956
	Old	Young	-.13333	2.10656	.998	-5.6956	5.4289
		Middle	2.26667	2.10656	.545	-3.2956	7.8289
[g]	Young	Middle	-2.40000	2.20023	.536	-8.2096	3.4096
		Old	-.13333	2.10656	.998	-5.6956	5.4289
	Middle	Young	2.40000	2.20023	.536	-3.4096	8.2096
		Old	2.26667	2.10656	.545	-3.2956	7.8289
	Old	Young	.13333	2.10656	.998	-5.4289	5.6956
		Middle	-2.26667	2.10656	.545	-7.8289	3.2956

/ɔ:/

It is clear from the figures in Figure 4 and Table 5 that there is an age-based pattern in the data wherein particularly young and middle age groups use a greater proportion of the standard [u:] variants than do their old counterparts. A *post hoc* analysis was performed and it revealed that the difference between young and middle and that of the old speakers group is significant at the 0.05 level (Table 4). This result clearly indicates that a generational change is in process in the use of this variant.

It was also observed that [ɔ:] is not limited to the phonological context of emphatics and pharyngeals as it is suggested in the literature. Rather, it occurs in the environment of other sounds such as [k] and [m] as in the following examples:

‘yibkoon’ [yibkɔ:n] ‘crying’
yesamooha’ [yisamɔ:ha:] ‘It is called’

The results also show that the change of [ɔ:] to [u:] in the vocalised /r/ context is nearing completion as one or two instances (e.g. [xɔ:fɛ:n] ‘sheep’) of this sound have been recorded by all speakers.

A closer look at the results of this variable would also reveal that its phonological behaviour is moving towards *gilit* in that the environments (a) and (b) referred to earlier are coalescing into a *gilit* [u:] while environments (c) and (d) remained intact as their realisation in MA is already matching that of *gilit*. As such, tokens from these two latter environments were not considered in the statistical design, as their realisation was categorical but their behaviour was still revealing in terms of the overall behaviour of this variable.

Figure 4: Distribution of [ɔ:] and [u:] by age.

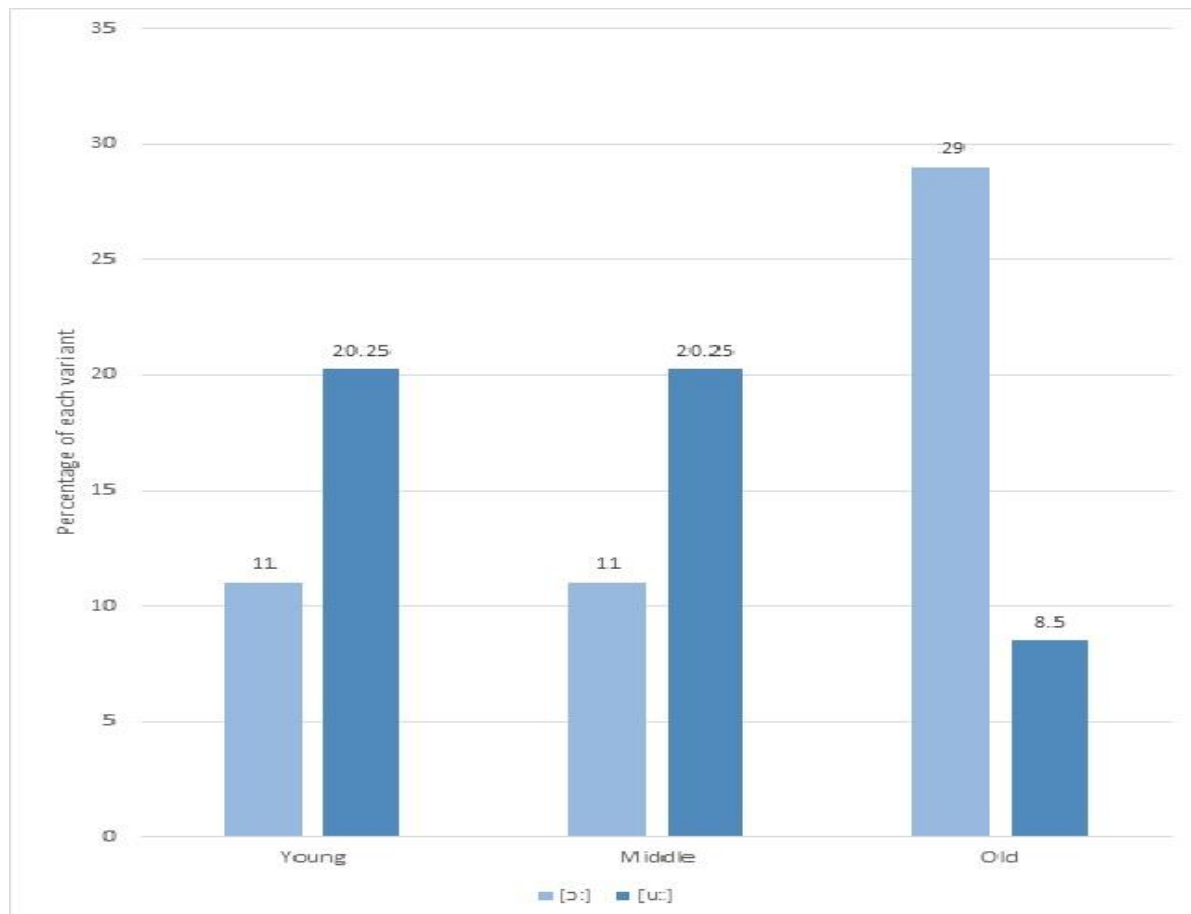


Table 4: *post hoc* analysis for age cohorts

Multiple Comparisons

Tukey HSD

Dependent Variable	(I) Age	(J) Age	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
[ɔ:]	Young	Middle	.00000	4.14073	1.000	-10.9333	10.9333
		Old	-12.56667*	3.96445	.019	-23.0345	-2.0988
	Middle	Young	.00000	4.14073	1.000	-10.9333	10.9333
		Old	-12.56667*	3.96445	.019	-23.0345	-2.0988
	Old	Young	12.56667*	3.96445	.019	2.0988	23.0345
		Middle	12.56667*	3.96445	.019	2.0988	23.0345
[u:]	Young	Middle	.00000	4.14073	1.000	-10.9333	10.9333
		Old	12.56667*	3.96445	.019	2.0988	23.0345
	Middle	Young	.00000	4.14073	1.000	-10.9333	10.9333
		Old	12.56667*	3.96445	.019	2.0988	23.0345
	Old	Young	-12.56667*	3.96445	.019	-23.0345	-2.0988
		Middle	-12.56667*	3.96445	.019	-23.0345	-2.0988

Table 5: One-Way ANOVA for age.

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
[ɔ:]	Between Groups	592.204	2	296.102	6.908	.009
	Within Groups	557.233	13	42.864		
	Total	1149.438	15			
[u:]	Between Groups	592.204	2	296.102	6.908	.009
	Within Groups	557.233	13	42.864		
	Total	1149.438	15			

9- Discussion

The preservation of [q], it is suggested, is due to the social connotations this sound has in the community that keep it in circulation among competitive alternatives. This social strength stems from the fact that it acts as a symbol of the Maslawi identity since the

shibboleths *qiqu* and *qhah* by which Maslawis can be identified among the different population groups of Mosul are based on it. A further factor in the preservation of this sound is the nature of relationships that exist between the members of MA community. While the newcomers from several parts of Iraq have infiltrated into Mosul, it is reported that MA-speaking community is still clustered around certain areas in central Mosul. Under such conditions, Milroy and Milroy (1985) note, linguistic traditions most likely tend to remain in use. As such, the MA-speaking community appears to assert this identity amidst the diluted environment of present-day Mosul by exploiting this particular sound.

The preservation of [q] also shows that MA appears to be resisting the levelling of this variant, unlike the case reported in other *qeltu* varieties such as Hit, Tikrit, and Ana as well as other *qeltu* varieties spoken outside the political boundaries of Iraq (Al-Ani 1976). The results, thus, corroborate Al-Ani's (1976) statement that Mosul is considered as a "stronghold" for [q].

On the other hand, [ɔ:] seems to be lacking the social connotation that [q] has and is thus liable to change. In situations of dialect contact, speakers, while still trying to assert their identity, need to accentuate their communicatory fit with their interlocutors. Thus, features with a strong social value (e.g. [q]) are likely to remain in use while those features (e.g. [ɔ:]) which do not seem strongly salient to speakers fall below the survival threshold and thus gradually fall into disuse in everyday speech.

10. Conclusion

It was noted earlier in the paper that several *qeltu*-type dialects are reported to be currently undergoing change as a result of different non-linguistic factors. Mosul, which has been at the centre of several social upheavals, constitutes an ideal location for levelling to occur. As an initial report of a larger project investigating phonological variation and change in MA, this paper sought to examine the process of dialect levelling in this variety.

With the caveat of the limitations of this study, it can, however, be stated that upon the generational differences exhibited in the speakers' use of [ɔ:], there is enough evidence to claim that the use of MA shows traces of levelling. This is suggested to follow from the demographic disruption in Mosul, which brought Maslawis into close contact with speakers of other varieties thereby contributing to a dilution of MA. However, MA does not seem to be retreating wholesale as some sounds seem to be more stable and less likely to be supplanted by standard equivalents. This is evidenced by the almost categorical realisation of /q/ as [q] by all speakers of all socially-stratified groups incorporated in the study. The fragmentation of the cohesive demographic fabric of Mosul has visibly intensified as a result of the events Mosul has gone through making it conducive to dialectal change. However, the linguistic behaviour of MA speakers appears to be resisting complete bleaching-out by preserving identity-defining dialectal features (e.g. [q]).

A note of caution is in order here. These results are preliminary in nature given the limitations of the study. With this in mind, the findings reported here, thus, should be interpreted with caution as a fuller investigation with a larger informant sample is needed to confidently discern the current status and future implications of MA.

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