

<p><b>Language and Palestinian Identity</b></p>		<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Linguistics</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Dialect, National Identity, Affiliation, Culture, Right of Return.</p>
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**Abstract**

In cultural studies, using your own dialect in communication means that you belong to the culture of that dialect, and that you are not compromising any association of that culture, particularly your identity. This paper seeks to study the limits of the relationship between Palestinian dialect and identity. In many cases, especially when the nation doesn't have its own state, it is very important that the people find a unifying power. Palestinians in Jordan are citizens of that country; some of them dream of returning home, and thus they are still proud of their national dialect; others speak the Jordanian dialect, and this raises a multitude of questions. Through a sample stratified on the basis of gender, age and level of educational attainment, the paper found that the percentage of those who used the Jordanian dialect was substantial, and from a linguistic point of view, symbolic and significant. Assuming that external factors are irrelevant, the findings suggest that those who relinquished their Palestinian dialect might have compromised their true national identity.

**Introduction**

From a pure linguistic perspective, language is an axiomatic reflection of the national identity. The demonym for the people of France is 'French', which is also the language French people speak; the demonym for the people of England is 'English', which is also the language they speak; the demonym for Persia is Persian, which is also the language of this nation, etc. In this linguistic sense, the relationship between language and identity is direct and unquestionable. This rather obvious relationship drives us first to ponder the nature of language before we continue to examine its relevance to identity. Different approaches to the study of language have built upon presumptions, and accordingly given insights into the nature of language. Recently though, and with the emergence of interdisciplinary approaches (such as sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, anthropological linguistics), the concept of language has gained extra dimensions that go beyond the traditional understanding of what a language is.

Language is not a mere system of signs that serve to connect people; it is also part of who we are. Today, linguistic anthropologists examine language as part of the culture. On the other hand, sociolinguists view language as a network of transactions, while psycholinguists believe that language carries content and it is by and of itself content and reality as well as a social event. From a sociolinguistic viewpoint- apart from the nature of language and its relationship with people and social groups- there are three basic features of language. First, language is the principal means of nurturing socialization in children. Second, it is through language/dialect that a group acquires a linguistic character that makes it stand out as a unified community different from other communities speaking different languages/dialects; i.e., it creates effective borders between different communities. Third, the status given to the language of a group makes the children of this group aware of the social status of their group (Padilla, 1999: 116). This controversy is not only about the nature of language, social identity has also been a debatable issue. Social identity is that part of the individual self-concept that is derived from the individual's affiliation with a social group, together with all values and emotional significance associated with that affiliation (Tajfel, 1978). Some scholars (see, for example, Woodward, 1997) argue that the contemporary social identity is a product of a multiplicity of sources (national, ethnic, social class, gender, etc.). According to Woodward, social identity gives us a position, establishes a linkage with the society we live in and is often defined by its difference from other identities. Since they are solid and vivid, identities are indicators of social systems and social changes, and thus they are instrumental for both the individual and the group.

## Language and Identity

Having briefly examined the nature of language and aspects of national identity, we now investigate the relationship between them. The close link between language and national identity has always been there. However, it was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that linguists started to consider such an affinity. It is believed that language is one of the most important symbols of individual and collective cultures; it is an essential element through which groups create their own identities and establish themselves independent of other groups; and it is the most prominent representation of social aspirations— carrying the past, reflecting the present and pioneering the future. Yet, the nature of the relationship between language and identity is not always clear, and there are a lot of questions to which we do not have definitive answers. Some believe that language has no organic relationship with identity (see, for example, Appel and Muysken, 2006). Others argue that language is a carrier of ethnic identity and a fundamental criterion side by side with cultural heritage, values and beliefs (see, Fishman, 1978).

Although language is a very important component, and symbol, of identity, the extent of its significance, with relation to identity, varies by context, and, accordingly, it is instrumental for some groups at a given situation and of secondary importance for other groups, again at a certain situation. For example, in a context where people cannot communicate unless they use the official language of the country they live in, language/dialect becomes of secondary importance. However, where people can communicate in different languages/dialects and still be intelligible by speakers of other languages/dialects, the use of language/dialect emerges as a critical benchmark that portrays a distinct identity. It should be made clear that language/dialect use discussed here is not the tentative use of language (i.e. a communication-oriented use in which the speaker has a message and wants to deliver it anyway). Rather, it is the deliberate permanent use of a language/dialect the speakers choose whenever they want to communicate, even with the members of the family. The constant conscious selection of one dialect over another has some significance and is occasioned by different reasons.

## Historical Background

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, some Jews started to immigrate to the Ottoman Palestine and settle there. Tensions between the Jews and the Palestinians started to emerge after the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when influxes of European Jews started to arrive to Palestine, which was then under the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman census data reveal that the population of Palestine in 1882 was about 468,000: 408,000 Muslims, 44,000 Christians and 15,000 Jews (McCarthy, 1988). The Jewish population grew to 39,000 by the start of WWI. In the following years, and specifically under the British Mandate, large waves of European Jews started to arrive and settle the land. The Jewish community was well-armed and dreaming of establishing a national state for the Jews worldwide. Thus, violence against Palestinians started and continued to mount during the 1940s, with attacks mainly made by Jewish gangs against Palestinian civilian. In 1947, the population of the present day Israel totaled 1,845,000, including 608,000 Jews and 1,237,000 Arabs (United Nations Special Committee on Palestine, 1947).

Following the British withdrawal from Mandatory Palestine and the declaration of the State of Israel in May 1948, the Jewish gangs started to flush Palestinians out of the Jewish-populated areas, thus expelling and forcing about two thirds of Palestinians to flee the areas that came under Jewish control. The United Nations put the figure of those who were expelled or fled at 726,000, who later became refugees (UN Conciliation Commission, 1950). Israel did not allow these expatriates to return to their homes, forcing them to seek refuge in the neighboring countries, specifically Lebanon, Jordan and Syria. According to the *Report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*, Palestinian refugees totaled 957,000 in 1950. In 2013, the number of registered Palestine refugees has grown to around 5 million (UNRWA, 2013).

The 1967 war (when Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip) had aggravated the Palestinian plight. Between 1948 and 1967, the West Bank was part of Jordan, and thus Palestinians would freely move to Jordan and back again to the West Bank, sometimes travelling twice within the same day. As the war broke out, those West Bankers either visiting or working in Jordan remained there because Israel did not allow them to return to their homes, and some 400,000 Palestinian families formed a new influx of refugees, who later came to be known as 'displaced persons' (Abu-Lughod, 1971). Today, Palestinians make up the vast majority of Jordan's population<sup>3</sup>. According to the Oxford Business Group (2007), Palestinians represent about two thirds of Jordan's population<sup>4</sup>. The same estimate was reached by George (2005, p 4). However, the American State Department (2002) estimates that Palestinians constitute "more than half" of the country's population, which is also the same proportion given by the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2009). Whether two thirds or half of the population, the Palestinians are the largest community in Jordan, especially that the remaining residents are not entirely Jordanians. There are minority groups such as Iraqis, Syrians, Lebanese, Chechens, South Asians, Armenians and Egyptians, suggesting that endogenous Jordanians are minority with relation to Palestinians.

### **Linguistic Background**

#### *Levantine Arabic*

Levantine Arabic is a wide-ranging variety of Arabic spoken in an expanse that is about 200 kilometers in the Eastern Mediterranean coastal strip (Versteegh, 2001), and it is one of the five main dialects of Arabic (Bassiouny, 2009). As long as intelligibility is concerned, Levantine Arabic is considered an independent language different from other Arabic dialects. Levantine Arabic is spoken by people living in Syria, Palestine and Lebanon, as well as Israeli Arabs. Bedouins in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Israel comprise a minority. In 1999, around 170,000 Bedouins lived in Israel (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1999). In Jordan, they make up only 7 to 10 percent of the country's population (Shoup, 2007, P. 5). In Syria, they constitute about 5 percent of the population (Commins and Lesch, 2013), while in Lebanon they account for a scant 2-3 percent of the country's population (Kak, 2010). In the Occupied Palestinian Territories (the West Bank and the Gaza Strip), the Bedouin communities represent less than 1 percent of the population (UNDP, 2013).

Levantine Arabic has three sub-dialects:

1. Urban: spoken by urban populations in Syria, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon; some Palestinians living in Jordan; and most Palestinians around the world.
2. Rural: spoken by rural populations in Syria, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon; some Palestinians living in Jordan; and some Palestinians around the world.
3. Bedouin: spoken by Bedouin minorities in Syria, Palestine, Israel and Lebanon, as well as by the native Jordanians and some Palestinians living in Jordan.

While the first two dialects are a common linguistic characteristic of the population living at the Eastern Mediterranean coast- with only broad linguistic relationship with Arabia dialects- the Bedouin dialect has retained most of the features found in Hejazi Arabic spoken in the Hejaz region in Saudi Arabia (Jeddah, Medina and Mecca). It is exactly this dialect that supposedly reveals the Jordanian identity. While some Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel still speak this dialect in their daily communication, their number is

<sup>3</sup> The Jordanian government has never disclosed the exact percentage of Palestinians in the country.

<sup>4</sup> This London-based organization arrived at these figures in collaboration with Jordanian government bodies.

negligible compared to the entire Palestinian population. In Jordan, on the other hand, this dialect has gained ground, and now spoken by almost all indigenous Jordanians, the majority of whom is of Bedouin origins.

### Palestinian versus Jordanian Arabic

The Palestinian urban and rural dialects are offshoots of northern Levantine Arabic dialects, which are also found in western Lebanon and Syria (Ammon et al., 2006). Jordanian Arabic (which used to be spoken by indigenous Jordanians up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and now spoken also by some Palestinians living in the country) belongs to Levantine Bedouin Arabic.

The Palestinian dialect is a representative of the Levantine Arabic at all linguistic levels. Before considering the main differences between the two dialects in question (i.e. the Palestinian dialect and the Jordanian dialect), we might need to emphasize that those Palestinians who moved to live in Jordan largely chose cities, especially Amman, Salt, Zarqa and Irbid. The bottom line conclusion is that because of social considerations<sup>5</sup>, those coming from rural areas (and thus speaking rural Levantine) have, to a great extent, abandoned their rural varieties, opting, instead, for urban dialects characteristic of city dwellers. On the other hand, those Palestinians of Bedouin origin living in Jordan— comprising a minority— will not be subject to this study, since one wouldn't be able to tell whether they speak this dialect because it is their endogenous variety or because they have already identified themselves with the Jordanian dialect, and thus they speak it as part of their affiliation within that linguistic society. That is why our analysis will focus on the urban variety which will be, later in this paper, dubbed 'Palestinian Dialect'.

That said, we now turn to highlight the main differences between the Palestinian dialect and the Jordanian dialect. This way, we will be able to differentiate between those who speak the Jordanian Arabic and those who speak the Palestinian Arabic. Of course, the two dialects are so distinct that people living in Jordan (as well as in other countries speaking the Levantine dialect) would definitely recognize the dialect and unhesitatingly tell whether what they are listening to is a Palestinian or Jordanian dialect. It suffices to say that the mere articulation of an utterance can reveal the identity of the speaker. Below, however, and only for clarification, we list some of the main features that make the Palestinian dialect stand in stark contrast to the Jordanian dialect:

- A traditional stress pattern compatible with that of Classical Arabic.<sup>6</sup>
- Raising the feminine ending –a in non-emphatic and non-guttural contexts. The morpheme –a changes into /i/ if it is not preceded by an emphatic or a pharyngeal/laryngeal consonant (t<sup>ʕ</sup>, d<sup>ʕ</sup>, ð<sup>ʕ</sup>, q).<sup>7</sup>
- Changing the standard /q/ into [ʔ] in the cities, while retaining it in villages.<sup>8</sup>
- Realizing /dʒ/ as [ʒ].
- Completely ignoring inter-dental consonants /ð/ and /θ/, and replacing them with /z/ and /t/ (and sometimes /s/), respectively.<sup>9</sup>
- The Palestinian sound 'ayn' is pharyngeal [ʕ].<sup>10</sup>
- Replacing the Standard Arabic voiced dental fricative /ð<sup>ʕ</sup>/ with the voiced alveolar plosive /d<sup>ʕ</sup>/.<sup>11</sup>
- The glottal consonant /h/ is lightly aspirated<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Some people from rural areas (especially females) feel embarrassed using rural dialects when they communicate with city dwellers.

<sup>6</sup> The stress system in the Jordanian dialect, on the other hand, is a departure from the one utilized by Standard Arabic.

<sup>7</sup> The Jordanian dialect retains the Standard Arabic /a/ vowel.

<sup>8</sup> The Jordanian dialect, as well as all Arabian dialects, realize the standard /q/ as /g/, a sound that does not exist in Standard Arabic.

<sup>9</sup> The sounds /dʒ/, /ð/ and /θ/ are retained by the Jordanian dialect.

<sup>10</sup> This sound is epiglottal [ʕ] in Jordanian and all Bedouin dialects.

<sup>11</sup> The Jordanian dialect retains the sound /ð<sup>ʕ</sup>/.

<sup>12</sup> It is heavily aspirated in Jordanian Arabic.

## Rationale

The question of the relationship between language and national identity has exhaustively been investigated by scholars in the field. However, the relationship between dialect and national identity has rarely been of pressing concern. While all nations on earth live in their homelands or travel for a while— thus the dialect is not an issue for them because soon they are returning home— the Palestinians have no homeland in the common since. There are about 6 million Palestinians living in Israel and the Palestinian Territory. In neighboring countries (and the rest of the world), there are also roughly 6 million Palestinians. This uncommon situation has given rise to issues of identity at the level of the dialect, since the people of the states where the majority of expatriate Palestinians live speak Arabic, so speaking Arabic in an Arab country has nothing to do with identity. In this context, it is the dialect, not language, that reveals one's identity.

Today, Palestinian identity is a burning issue in light of the current negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinians and the talk about the 'right of return'<sup>13</sup>. In an already overcrowded territory (home for about 7 million Israelis and 6 million Palestinians), the talk about the return of 6 million more people might raise a lot of questions, especially from the Israelis.

Of course, there are many common things that unify the Palestinians (e.g. values, traditions, ethnicity, etc.), but it is specifically dialect that makes them identify with their Palestinian culture versus other Arab cultures. The right of return (whether to Israel or to the Palestinian Territory) is a sacred one- as the saying goes. However, national identity is not a matter of bragging about how patriotic you are. It is derisory that one asks you a question about your right of return to your homeland, and you answer in a different dialect, though you know how to speak with your own dialect. Palestinians in Jordan are citizens of Jordan; some of them dream of returning home, and thus they are still proud of their national dialect; others speak the Jordanian dialect, and thus they might not be longing for returning home, so to speak. Now, if it is about selectivity and judgments on who has the right to return (in light of the restrictions on the number of people who are allowed to return), the trade-off should be in favor of those who are emotionally attached to the land of their fathers, and the most salient sign of such an attachment is dialect.

In his *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Goffman (1963) argues that identity is entirely created through language whose choices are closely associated with who we are. Goffman continues to say that identity is bounded by how others view us, not how we view ourselves. I might identify myself as nationalistic, but other people might have a completely different view. Eventually, it is the society that draws the boundaries of linguistic and cultural choices.

## Methodology

The study sample was randomly chosen. The researcher conducted interviews with 176 people (91 males and 85 females) aged 23-75 years old<sup>14</sup>, without the respondents being aware that their dialect was the focus of the study. All of the study subjects live in Amman, home for the largest Palestinian community. The study sample was stratified on the basis of gender, age and level of educational attainment. The contacts with the study population occurred over a long period and in different places:

<sup>13</sup> The Palestinian right of return is a political position asserting that Palestinian refugees (both first-generation refugees and their descendants) have a right to return to the land they left or were forced to leave in what is now Israel and the Palestinian Territory. In its Resolution 169 (1980), Article 66, the United Nations General Assembly reaffirmed "the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property in Palestine, from which they have been displaced and uprooted, and calls for their return."

<sup>14</sup> These were roughly evenly distributed: 64 (young), 57 (middle age) and 55 (old age).

1. Five social occasions (weddings, parties, holidays, etc) in 2 years (June 29<sup>th</sup>-August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and January 27<sup>th</sup>-February 20<sup>th</sup>, 2014), all of them took place in Amman;
2. Communicating with acquaintances<sup>15</sup> coming from Amman to the West Bank as visitors;
3. Mall interviews arranged by a friend of mine who works in the City Mall (interviews targeted retailers, dealers and owners of cafes); and
5. Personal in-home interviews with friends, relatives or acquaintances.

It is important here to note that the interviews involved free conversations where language would be spoken naturally without preciosity. The idea was so simple: the mere production of a statement would definitely reveal the dialect. Yet, that was not enough; the researcher also wanted to know their years of schooling and age<sup>16</sup>. This was achieved through further conversations in a few minutes.

All respondents were Palestinians and the meetings occurred only in the presence of Palestinians. This is to rule out the probability that speakers might sometimes shift to another dialect to feel considerate to speakers of other dialects. And so, the meetings were not intended to detect language options (i.e. how much components they used from Palestinian versus Jordanian dialect). Rather, observations focused on whether speakers tended to entirely use the Palestinian dialect or the Jordanian dialect, with the one totally excluding the other. Therefore, we will not be discussing the percentages of the occurrences of either dialect. Instead, we will focus only on the number of speakers of both dialects.

## Results

The tables below summarize the results of the interviews:

**Table 1: Distribution of Speakers- by Age**

Age Group	Total	Palestinian Dialect (No.)	Palestinian Dialect (%) *	Jordanian Dialect (No.)	Jordanian Dialect (%)*
Young (23-40)	64	46	72	18	28
Middle age (41-60)	57	38	67	19	33
Old age (61-75)	55	34	62	21	38

**Table 2: Distribution of Speakers- by Gender**

Gender	Total	Palestinian Dialect (No.)	Palestinian Dialect (%) *	Jordanian Dialect (No.)	Jordanian Dialect (%)*
Females	85	79	93	6	7
Males	91	49	54	42	46

<sup>15</sup> One can hardly find a family in the West Bank with no familial contacts in Jordan. It is the case that you might live in the West Bank, but having the majority of your relatives and in-laws living in Jordan. Thus, the word 'acquaintances' here might mean relatives (or their acquaintances), friends (or their acquaintances) and in-laws (or their acquaintances). Notice also that a Palestinian clan can number up to thousands or even tens of thousands.

<sup>16</sup> In cases where I couldn't acquire information on the variable 'age' (which occurred frequently as a result of distance considerations), I would do a guesswork as to the age group respondents belonged to.

**Table 3: Distribution of Speakers- by Educational Attainment**

Educational Attainment	Total	Palestinian Dialect (No.)	Palestinian Dialect (%) *	Jordanian Dialect (No.)	Jordanian Dialect (%)*
12 years of schooling or less	82	38	46	44	54
First university degree or above	94	74	79	20	21

\* Rough percentages

Several points can be concluded from the tables above:

- First, around 33 percent of respondents used the Jordanian dialect in communication.
- Second, it seems that young people tend to prefer the Palestinian dialect over the Jordanian dialect<sup>17</sup>.
- Third, it appears that the higher the years of schooling, the higher the likelihood of opting for the Palestinian dialect, with a whopping 79 percent of university graduates choosing the Palestinian dialect.
- Gender is the most significant independent variable. Out of 85 women, 79 used the Palestinian dialect. This percentage by far outweighs that found among males, with 46 percent choosing the Jordanian dialect.

**Discussion**

Broadly speaking, the majority of the study subjects (across all variables combined) used the Palestinian dialect; yet, the percentage of those who used the Jordanian dialect was substantial, and from the a linguistic point of view, symbolic and significant. In general, about 33 percent of Palestinians living in Jordan speak the Jordanian dialect (59 out of 176), which raises the question of whether these people have renounced their ties to their roots, waiving their language along the way.

Speaking in your own dialect means that you are part of the culture of that dialect, and that you are not compromising all associations of that culture, more prominently your identity. If you are proud of your identity, then there is no justification for speaking a different dialect. In many cases, especially when the nation doesn't have its own state, it is very important that the people find a unifying power. While human beings allow themselves multiple social identities (e.g. as they move from the village to the city within their home country), they should hold on to their dialect when they move to other places with different national identities. To relinquish your own dialect is synonymous with compromising your national identity.

There is a deep-seated relationship between language and identity. Indeed, language is a 'speaking' identity. It is language that carries national identity concerns and consolidates the collective feeling of affinity and integration. In this sense, the value of language does not lie in its abstract nature or linguistic components; rather, it is a reflection of how speakers of this language construe the world around and how they develop their thought, which is also a reflection of their culture and national survival.

Needless to say, a language is the conveyor of national identity, and, as such, only those who speak it have true ties to their national identity. Being a member in a nation entails many obligations, particularly

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<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to know that these people would think that the Palestinian dialect is more prestigious. When I asked one of the respondents about his dialect, being completely different from his parents', he said that the Jordanian dialect uses coarse, unrefined sounds. To further his point of view, he invoked the case when people have the opportunity to be on air (whether on radio or TV, probably heard by millions), saying that these people who originally speak the Jordanian dialect would shift to the Palestinian dialect.

speaking the language of that nation. One-third of Palestinians in Jordan do not speak the Palestinian dialect, and we might not be doing an injustice to them if we presume that they have renounced their bonds with their homeland. The Berbers in Algeria, Libya Tunisia and Morocco are minority communities; still they speak their Berber languages. The Kurds in Iraq and Syria are also minorities, but they speak Kurdish languages. Ironically, the Palestinians constitute the majority of Jordan's population; yet some of them have broken with their national language, thus brushing off their memories, culture and national attachment along the way.

Some might argue that it could be the case that Palestinians in Jordan are under-represented in the public sector and discriminated against in sectors dominated by native Jordanians (World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, 2008), and therefore they are forced to pretend to be Jordanians. That is a reasonable justification if the talk is about language use in certain contexts, which is not the case. Those Palestinians who speak the Jordanian dialect choose<sup>18</sup> it in all contexts, even when they communicate with their family members. Others might argue that Palestinians speak the Jordanian dialect to feel safe, especially following the slaughter of thousands of Palestinians by the Jordanian military in September 1970 (Massad, 2001). This is also a flawed argument. What about the other two-thirds who speak the Palestinian dialect. Of course, there are no incidences of punishing people for speaking the Palestinian dialect.

This conclusion might not be tenable if we assume that other external factors might come into play. However, investigating the reasons why some Palestinians choose the Jordanian dialect is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, further research into the subject matter might need to discuss the underlying causes behind such a linguistic phenomenon.

Obviously, the Palestinian dialect in Jordan has suffered ingratitude by some Palestinians. It seems that the talk about 4 million Palestinians in Jordan is a hoax- or at least inaccurate- as long as identity is in question. It is true that Palestinians in Jordan constitute a majority of the population; yet the question is not only about numbers. It is a question of affiliation and a unifying identity in the first place. Those who relinquished their Palestinian dialect might have compromised their history, heritage and true nationality altogether. Concerned parties, in response, should exert strenuous efforts to sensitize people to the implications of abandoning their own dialect, unequivocally a manifestation of unification and national character. Such efforts should be informed by wise, prudent policies by public, civil, media and grassroots agencies.

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<sup>18</sup> I use the word 'choose' because all Palestinians can speak the Palestinian dialect, thus speaking the Jordanian dialect is a matter of choice.

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