

A Linguistic Innovation of Women in Cairo

Niloofar Haeri (1994)

This article is about palatalization (PL) in Cairene Arabic, also known as Egyptian Arabic. Haeri provides evidence that UC women are innovators of this sound change. The variable is weak/strong palatalization. The data consists of 8011 tokens extracted from 49 tape-recorded interviews (25 female/24 male).

Linguistic analysis

What is affected? Dental stops like: /t,d/ = 'plain' and /T,D/ = emphatic, accompanied by pharyngealization (PH). *Where?* Environments favored for PL follow high front vowel or glide.

Two possible outcomes: weak PL (frication) or strong PL (affricate tʃ, dʒ).

Question 1: How do PL and PH work together? Often phonemically pharyngeal segments are articulated without PH. Evidence comes from Royal (1985), stating that PH is a variable, gradient process. Based on empirical data Kahn (1975) states that Egyptians have weaker PH; and in their dictionary Badawi and Hinds (1986) list entries with alternative pronunciation – with emphatic and plain dental stops. The conclusion is that plain dental stops have higher probability to undergo PL. As to pharyngeals segments, they first go through “de-pharyngealization” followed by PL.

Further, Haeri gives evidence why word-final [i] is a better candidate for PL than non-final [i], concluding that vowel height is also a crucial factor for promoting PL. Then the author turns to whether weak and strong PL represents one or two processes. She says it is a one process and we are dealing with a gradient variable with three variants: *not*, *weakly*, or *strongly* palatalized.

Sociolinguistic analysis

Gender. PL is the strongest distinguishing factor between Cairene speaking men and women. Female speakers of Cairene Arabic have high frequency of PL whereas male speakers have little.

Question 2: Is PL a sound change in progress or has it gone to completion? PL (both strong and weak) is a change in progress. Strong PL was not been part of Cairene phonology in the 1920s and 1930s (Fig 1. p. 98). Comparing the oldest groups in terms of weak and strong PL (Figs. 1 and 2) is most likely that weak PL precedes strong PL.

Social Class. Weak PL: Upper Middle Class (UMC) have almost twice weak PL as high as women in Lower Middle Class (LMC) and Middle Middle Class (MMC) (Fig. 5, p.101). Strong PL: LMC and MMC have highest frequencies. Haeri concludes that weak PL has come first and was introduced by women of UC and UMC.

Style. Weak PL is associated with women in UC and UMC, while strong PL is linked to MC and LMC.

Education. The correlation is: women (most UC and UMC) who attended private schools have high frequency of weak PL and women who attended public schools have high percentage of strong PH. Level: strong PL decreases after high school. Women in high school have the highest amount of strong PL.

Conclusion: strong PL is a feature of Middle and Lower Middle class, high school educated women.

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What was discussed:

- The methodology – what would be the best way to explore the research questions