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PHONETIC VARIATION OF QAF AND JIM IN EGYPTIAN AND SAUDI ARABIC DIALECTS: INSIGHTS FROM YOUTUBE AUDIOVISUAL DATA AND POPULAR MUSIC

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Abstract

This study analyzes the phonetic differences in the pronunciation of the letters Qaaf (ق) and Jīm (ج) in the Egyptian and Saudi Arabic dialects. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research draws data from audiovisual sources such as popular songs and YouTube videos featuring native speakers. The findings reveal that in Egyptian Arabic, Qaaf is frequently realized as a glottal stop (ʔ), and Jīm as a voiced velar stop (g). In contrast, in Saudi Arabic, both letters tend to retain their Classical Arabic pronunciation: /q/ for Qaaf and /dʒ/ for Jīm. These phonetic differences are not merely articulatory; they also carry sociolinguistic significance, reflecting social identity, formality level, and cultural values. This research contributes to modern Arabic language learning by emphasizing the importance of understanding dialectal variation in pronunciation, especially in real-life communication across Arabic-speaking regions.

Keywords: Qāf, Jīm, Arabic dialects, phonetics, Arabic learning

Introduction

Arabic is not merely a means of daily communication for its speakers, but also holds deep cultural and religious significance. It serves as a fundamental key to understanding Islamic teachings, as both the Qur'an and Hadith the two primary sources of Islamic law are revealed in Arabic. Moreover, Arabic's designation as one of the official languages of the United Nations highlights its global relevance as a medium of cross-cultural and international communication.¹

¹ Universitas Ibrahimy Situbondo, "Lahjah Arabiyah Lahjah Arabiyah" 2, no. 1 (2021): 30–39.

In learning Arabic, speaking skills (*mahārat al-kalām*) play a crucial role. Spoken language is used more frequently than written language to convey thoughts and emotions. However, learners often face challenges in mastering *lahjah* (dialectal) variations, which differ significantly across regions. Mispronunciations commonly occur, especially considering that learners come from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, whose native phonologies may influence their articulation of Arabic sounds.²

Neglecting the phonetic and phonological aspects in Arabic language instruction can lead to utterances being misunderstood or even unintelligible to native speakers. This may result in speech that sounds awkward or foreign. Therefore, understanding the sound system, particularly phonetics and phonology, is essential especially when studying Arabic dialects. Phonetics concerns the physical articulation of sounds, while phonology focuses on the functional role of sounds in distinguishing meaning within a linguistic system.³

The study of phonetic variation, particularly in the pronunciation of the letters *Qaaf* (ق) and *Jiim* (ج) in Egyptian and Saudi dialects, is highly relevant due to the diverse regional pronunciations found within the Arabic language. For example, the word for "who" is pronounced as "man" in Saudi Arabia, "minu" in Baghdad, and "miin" in Cairo. These differences are not limited to vocabulary but also involve subtle changes in articulation points (*makhārij*) that may appear similar yet differ in practice. Understanding such variations is vital for achieving accurate and context-appropriate pronunciation in Arabic language learning.⁴

Among the most prominent phonetic markers across dialects are the variations in the pronunciation of *Qaaf* and *Jiim*. These differences are shaped not only by geography but also by history, social status, and local identity⁵ In Egyptian Arabic, *Jiim* is typically pronounced as /g/, as in *gamal* (جمال), diverging from the Classical Arabic form *jamal*. *Qaaf*, meanwhile, often shifts to a glottal stop /ʔ/ – for example, *qahwa* (coffee) becomes 'ahwa. These phonetic

² Universitas Ibrahimy Situbondo, Universitas Yudharta Pasuruan, and Universitas Ibrahimy, "Analisis Kesalahan Dalam Menggunakan Lahjah Arabiyah Pada Maharah Kalam 1 1" 4, no. 2 (2023): 159-70, <https://doi.org/10.35316/lahjah.v4i2.159-170>.

³ Situbondo, "Lahjah Arabiyah Lahjah Arabiyah."

⁴ Harrassowitz Verlag, "Siwa and Its Significance for Arabic Dialectology Author (s): Lameen Souag Source : Zeitschrift Für Arabische Linguistik , No . 51 (2009), Pp . 51-75 Published by : Harrassowitz Verlag Stable URL : <http://Www.Jstor.Org/Stable/43525858>" 51, no. 51 (2016): 51-75.

⁵ Ahmed Abdelali et al., "QADI: Arabic Dialect Identification in the Wild," *WANLP 2021 - 6th Arabic Natural Language Processing Workshop, Proceedings of the Workshop*, 2021, 1-10; Ahmed Ali et al., "Automatic Dialect Detection in Arabic Broadcast Speech," *Proceedings of the Annual Conference of the International Speech Communication Association, INTERSPEECH 08-12-September-2016* (2016): 2934-38, <https://doi.org/10.21437/Interspeech.2016-1297>; European Philosophy, "INHALTSVERZEICHNIS – TABLE DES MATIÈRES," n.d.; Ahmed Haj Ahmed et al., "Navigating Dialectal Bias and Ethical Complexities in Levantine Arabic Hate Speech Detection," 2012; Yassine El Kheir et al., "Beyond Orthography: Automatic Recovery of Short Vowels and Dialectal Sounds in Arabic † +," 2023; Ayu Auliya et al., "The Digital Revolution in Arabic Language Learning : An Analysis of Trends , Results , and the Future of Language Education in the Digital Age," no. Riicis (2024); Maha J. Althobaiti, "Automatic Arabic Dialect Identification Systems for Written Texts: A Survey," 2020, <http://arxiv.org/abs/2009.12622>.

changes are frequently observed in popular Egyptian media, including YouTube videos and contemporary music. Conversely, in Saudi Arabic, both *Qaaf* and *Jiim* are largely pronounced according to their Classical Arabic forms, /q/ and /dʒ/, respectively.⁶

These variations can be identified through acoustic and lexical features, enabling high-accuracy dialect detection systems. Prior research has shown that specific consonant pronunciations such as that of *Qaaf* can serve as strong indicators of both geographical and social origin.⁷ Abdelali's study, for example, used Twitter data to develop an Arabic dialect identification system for 18 countries, highlighting how certain sound patterns reflect linguistic and national identities.⁸

Clive Holes emphasized that phonetic variation in Arabic dialects is a natural evolution shaped by social usage, and should not be reduced solely to Modern Standard Arabic (MSA).⁹ In today's digital age, where learners are increasingly exposed to diverse dialects through media content, understanding such variation becomes even more relevant.¹⁰

The findings of this study indicate that the pronunciation of *Qaaf* and *Jiim* in Egyptian and Saudi Arabic reflects broader sociolinguistic complexities. For instance, the use of /g/ for *Jiim* in Egyptian media conveys familiarity and informality, whereas the more classical pronunciation in Saudi Arabic suggests religiosity and formality. These differences are not merely phonetic but serve as expressions of embedded local values and identities.

In Arabic dialectology, *Qaaf* and *Jiim* are among the clearest phonetic indicators differentiating regional varieties. Their pronunciations not only signify articulatory shifts but also reflect deeper sociolinguistic dimensions such as identity, social class, and geographic proximity. In Classical Arabic, *Qaaf* is pronounced as a voiceless uvular stop /q/, but in Egyptian Arabic, it is often realized as a glottal stop /ʔ/, as seen in the transition from *qahwa* to *'ahwa*. In some Saudi dialects, especially in Najd, *Qaaf* may also shift to /g/, highlighting phonological conservatism and local influence.¹¹

Jiim also exhibits clear variation. In MSA and Gulf dialects like Saudi Arabic, it is pronounced /dʒ/, similar to the English "j" in *judge*. In contrast, Egyptian Arabic shifts this to /g/, forming a defining phonetic feature of the dialect. Clive Holes identifies this

⁶ Abdelali et al., "QADI: Arabic Dialect Identification in the Wild."

⁷ Bashar Alhafni et al., "Exploiting Dialect Identification in Automatic Dialectal Text Normalization," *Proceedings of The Second Arabic Natural Language Processing Conference*, 2024, 42-54, <https://aclanthology.org/2024.arabicnlp-1.4>.

⁸ Abdelali et al., "QADI: Arabic Dialect Identification in the Wild."

⁹ Abdelali et al.

¹⁰ Abdelali et al.

¹¹ Abdelali et al.

transformation as one of the most prominent examples of socially and geographically driven phonetic evolution in the Arab world.¹²

Focusing on these two phonemes has significant implications for modern Arabic instruction. Technologies such as speech recognition systems now use specific *Qaaf* and *Jiim* pronunciations to automatically detect dialect origins.¹³ Thus, understanding these sounds is not only essential for Arabic phonology but also serves as a gateway to grasping the socio-cultural dynamics of contemporary Arabic-speaking communities. In teaching Arabic as a second language, mastering dialectal variation especially the pronunciation of phonologically distinct letters like *Qaaf* and *Jiim* is crucial. Arabic is characterized by diglossia: the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic and local dialects. The gap between formal and everyday spoken forms poses unique challenges for learners, particularly as they encounter contemporary media such as music, vlogs, and films rich in dialectal usage.¹⁴

For beginners, these variations can be confusing. For example, *Jiim* may sound like /g/ in Egyptian Arabic but like /dʒ/ in Saudi Arabic or MSA. Similarly, *Qaaf* may shift to /ʔ/ in dialects like Egyptian or Levantine Arabic. Lack of awareness of these patterns can lead to miscommunication and hinder overall comprehension. Therefore, introducing these phonetic variations is a vital component of effective language instruction.¹⁵

Beyond practical communication, learning about dialectal variation also deepens learners' sociolinguistic awareness of the cultural and social identities embedded in language. Each dialect reflects a local identity and social strata, meaning that variation in pronunciation tells us not only what is said, but who is speaking – and in what context.¹⁶ Recent studies show that digital platforms such as YouTube and other online applications have expanded learners' access to authentic dialectal input in real-world settings.¹⁷

Although a growing body of research has examined Arabic dialect variation and dialect identification using computational, lexical, or broad sociolinguistic approaches, relatively little attention has been paid to the detailed phonetic realization of specific phonemes in natural audiovisual media contexts. Previous studies tend to focus either on large-scale automatic dialect classification or on traditional dialect descriptions based on elicited or isolated speech data. As a result, the fine-grained phonetic behavior of salient consonants

¹² Auliya et al., "The Digital Revolution in Arabic Language Learning : An Analysis of Trends , Results , and the Future of Language Education in the Digital Age."

¹³ Muhammad Abdul-Mageed et al., "NADI 2022: The Third Nuanced Arabic Dialect Identification Shared Task," *WANLP 2022 - 7th Arabic Natural Language Processing - Proceedings of the Workshop*, 2022, 85–97, <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2022.wanlp-1.9>.

¹⁴ Abdul-Mageed et al.

¹⁵ Wael M.S. Yafooz, "Enhancing Arabic Dialect Detection on Social Media: A Hybrid Model with an Attention Mechanism," *Information (Switzerland)* 15, no. 6 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3390/info15060316>.

¹⁶ Verlag, "Siwa and Its Significance for Arabic Dialectology Author (s): Lameen Souag Source : Zeitschrift Für Arabische Linguistik , No . 51 (2009), Pp . 51-75 Published by : Harrassowitz Verlag Stable URL : <Http://Www.Jstor.Org/Stable/43525858>."

¹⁷ Ali et al., "Automatic Dialect Detection in Arabic Broadcast Speech."

such as Qāf and Jīm in contemporary popular discourse remains underexplored. Moreover, few studies explicitly connect these phonetic variations with their sociocultural meanings and pedagogical implications for Arabic language learning. This study addresses this gap by providing a qualitative phonetic analysis of Qāf and Jīm in Egyptian and Saudi Arabic as used in YouTube audiovisual data and popular music, while also interpreting these variations in relation to social identity, communicative context, and their relevance for learners of Arabic.

Based on the background and goals outlined above, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are the letters *Qaaf* (ق) and *Jiim* (ج) phonetically realized in Egyptian and Saudi Arabic dialects?
2. What are the social and cultural meanings embedded in the pronunciation of these letters across the two dialects?

These research questions serve as the foundation for analyzing phonetic phenomena that are not only technical in nature but also reflect the speaker's social identity and the cultural dynamics within the Arabic-speaking world.

Thus, integrating knowledge of dialectal variation—especially the distinct pronunciation of letters such as *Qaaf* and *Jiim*—is a crucial step in modern Arabic language instruction. This approach equips learners with both linguistic competence and cultural literacy, enabling them to engage more effectively in a globalized Arabic-speaking environment.¹⁸

Methodology

This research employs a descriptive qualitative method with a phonetic-sociolinguistic approach, aiming to analyze the phonetic realization of the letters *Qaaf* (ق) and *Jiim* (ج) in two major Arabic dialects: Egyptian and Saudi Arabic. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of sound variations in authentic social contexts and examines the connection between phonetic form and linguistic identity.¹⁹

Data were collected from online audiovisual media, specifically YouTube videos and popular songs that naturally feature dialect usage by native speakers. The data selection followed three main criteria: clear pronunciation of *Qaaf* and *Jiim*, sourced from reputable channels or artists widely recognized within native speaker communities and representing both formal (interviews, news, podcasts) and informal (songs, vlogs, dramas) contexts in

¹⁸ Alhafni et al., "Exploiting Dialect Identification in Automatic Dialectal Text Normalization."

¹⁹ Ali et al., "Automatic Dialect Detection in Arabic Broadcast Speech."

Arabic, this phoneme shifts to /g/, a voiced velar stop.²⁴ For example, the word *jamīl* (جميل) in MSA, pronounced /dʒami:l/, becomes *gamīl* /gami:l/ in Egyptian Arabic. In Saudi Arabic, Jiim is preserved as /dʒ/, reflecting the conservative phonological pattern. This change demonstrates a depalatalization process characteristic of informal social settings in Egyptian speech.²⁵

3. Comparative Analysis

Phonetically, the changes in Qaaf and Jiim pronunciation illustrate a trend toward consonantal softening and shifts in articulation points. The realization of /q/ as /ʔ/ and /dʒ/ as /g/ reveals how certain dialects favor articulations that are easier or more fluid in everyday communication.²⁶ Egyptian dialects also tend to eliminate short vowels and apply stress differently compared to the more conservative Saudi dialect.²⁷

Sociolinguistically, these phonetic variations are closely tied to identity, social class, and cultural proximity. In Egypt, using /ʔ/ instead of /q/ is often associated with urban speech and lower-middle social classes, while maintaining /q/ in Saudi Arabia correlates with traditional and conservative speech communities, including Bedouins.²⁸ In politically sensitive contexts, such as Syria, Qaaf pronunciation can even signal ideological affiliation.²⁹ This proves that dialectal differences extend beyond phonetics into the realms of social and political identity.

Phonetic Comparison: Qaaf (ق)

The letter *Qaaf* is pronounced as /q/ (a voiceless uvular plosive) in Standard Arabic (*Fusha*). In the Saudi Arabic dialect, this pronunciation is largely preserved. However, in the Egyptian Arabic dialect, *Qaaf* is often realized as a glottal stop or *hamzah* (ʔ), especially in informal contexts and everyday vocabulary. For example:

Word	MSA Pronunciation	Egyptian Arabic	Saudi Arabic	Notes
قهوة (qahwa)	/qahwa/	'ahwa	Qahwa	Qaaf shifts to glottal stop in Egyptian
قلب (qalb)	/qalb/	'alb	Qalb	Glottalization indicates informality

²⁴ Moftah.

²⁵ Moftah.

²⁶ Moftah.

²⁷ Moftah.

²⁸ Moftah.

²⁹ Ahmed et al., "Navigating Dialectal Bias and Ethical Complexities in Levantine Arabic Hate Speech Detection."

Phonetic Comparison: Jiim (ج)

In Standard Arabic (*Fusha*), the letter *Jiim* is pronounced as /dʒ/ (a voiced post-alveolar affricate), similar to the "j" sound in the English word *judge*. In the Saudi Arabic dialect, this pronunciation generally follows the *Fusha* form. However, in the Egyptian Arabic dialect, *Jiim* undergoes a noticeable shift to /g/ (a voiced velar plosive), like the "g" sound in the word *go*. This change is highly distinctive and serves as a key characteristic of the Egyptian dialect.

Below is a comparison table:

Word	MSA Pronunciation	Egyptian Arabic	Saudi Arabic	Notes
جميل (jamīl)	/dʒami:l/	/gami:l/	/dʒami:l/	Jiim becomes /g/ in Egyptian Arabic
جمال (jamal)	/dʒamal/	/gamal/	/dʒamal/	Consistent shift in initial Jiim
جار (jār)	/dʒa:r/	/ga:r/	/dʒa:r/	Stable shift of Jiim at word-initial position

Note: The shift in the pronunciation of Jiim from /dʒ/ to /g/ in the Egyptian dialect occurs consistently across various word positions and informal social contexts. This reflects a characteristic softening of articulation commonly found in urban Egyptian communities, particularly in Cairo.

The following are the research findings and Phonetic Transcriptions.

No	Source	Timestamp	Keyword	Dialect	IPA Pronunciation
1	Abdel Halim Hafez - <i>Ahwak</i>	01:14	قهوة	Egyptian	/Qahwa/
2	CBC Egypt - Mona El Shazly (Talkshow)	03:10	جميل	Egyptian	/gami:l/
3	Albi Ya Albi- Note Lyrics	01:14	قلبي	Egyptian	/albi/

4	3 Daqat- Abu feat Yusro	0:50	قلبي	Egyptian	/albi/
5	3 Daqat- Abu feat Yusro	01:16	يتقال	Egyptian	/et al/
6	3 Daqat- Abu feat Yusro	01:30	قلوبنا	Egyptian	/ulubna/
7	3 Daqat- Abu feat Yusro	01:55	جوايا	Egyptian	/guwaya/
8	Abdul Majeed Abdullah - <i>Ya Tayyib Al Qalb</i>	00:45	قلب	Saudi	/qalb/
9	Dar Basim- Kamarun <i>Kamarun</i>	01:12	قلب	Saudi	/qalb/
10	Maha Ftouni0 El Sabr Gamel	01:03	معقول	Egyptian	/ma'ul/
11	Ana Bansa Nafsy- Ramy Sabry	0:50	وبلاقي	Egyptian	/wi bala'i/
12	MBC Podcast - <i>Al Mowaten</i>	07:05	جميل	Saudi	/dʒami:l/
13	Street Interview - <i>Sho hay a'jabek fi Ramadan?</i>	04:12	قهوة	Saudi	/qahwa/
14	Wana Maak- Mohammed Alsahli	0:50	ويجيلك	Egypt	/wii ghilak/
	Mohamed Youssef& Adnan Ahmed	0:20	يا جنال	Saudi	/yaa jamalu/

Note: The data was collected through direct observation of audiovisual media on YouTube. Timestamps were recorded to indicate the authenticity of the data. Phonetic transcriptions were compiled using the International *Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) system*.

The pronunciation of *Qaaf* can serve as a marker of geographical identity. However, the use of popular media as a data source, as employed in this study, offers a new perspective on pronunciation variation within the context of popular culture.³⁰

Conclusion

This study reveals that the pronunciation of the letters *Qaaf* (ق) and *Jiim* (ج) shows striking differences between the Egyptian and Saudi Arabic dialects. In everyday conversations among Egyptians, *Qaaf* often shifts to a glottal stop /ʔ/, while *Jiim* is

³⁰ Amr Keleg, Sharon Goldwater, and Walid Magdy, "ALDi: Quantifying the Arabic Level of Dialectness of Text," *EMNLP 2023 - 2023 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing, Proceedings*, 2023, 10597-611, <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2023.emnlp-main.655>.

pronounced like the English "g" sound. In contrast, Saudi speakers tend to maintain the standard pronunciation /q/ for *Qaaf* and /dʒ/ for *Jiim*, as used in Modern Standard Arabic.

These phonetic differences reflect more than just variation in sounds – they carry deeper social meanings: who is speaking, where they come from, and in what social context the language is used. For instance, the /ʔ/ and /g/ pronunciations in Egypt convey an impression of informality, familiarity, and an urban identity, whereas the /q/ and /dʒ/ pronunciations in Saudi Arabia suggest tradition, formality, and conservative values.

From a language learning perspective, these findings are significant because they remind us that language is not only about phonetics but also about culture. Understanding such pronunciation variations helps Arabic learners – especially those learning it as a foreign language be better prepared to face the diversity of dialects and social contexts in real-life situations.

This research also demonstrates that using popular media, such as songs and YouTube videos, is not only engaging but also academically valid for observing natural language use. Therefore, this study contributes not only to phonetic linguistics but also opens new opportunities for more contextual and practical methods of teaching Arabic.

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