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Lexical and Phonological Levelling in the Speech of Qassimi Arabic Speakers

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Abstract

This study on linguistic levelling in the speech of Qassimi Arabic speakers found that there are six distinct aspects of phonological levelling present in the dialect, coupled with a plethora of examples on lexical levelling among two groups. Qassimi Arabic speakers who reside in the Qassim region and have lived there their entire lives, and Qassimi Arabic speakers who have resided in different Saudi regions most of their adult lives. Findings indicate that dialect changes occurred in nearly 2 of 3 participants and were due to the mixing of cultures and growing urbanisation. The results of the study are in line with other literature indicating that speakers of Qassimi Arabic engage in spontaneous levelling for prosocial motives, ease of use and convenience

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Dialect levelling is a term used by sociolinguists to describe the process by which unusual or marked forms in a variety of languages are reduced while forms with wider geographical use are retained. In areas where dialects are in contact and speakers mix, linguistic differences are minimised by the process of levelling. Over time, linguistic variability is reduced in favour of the most simplified forms (Trudgill, 1986). According to Hinskens (1996), the process of levelling involves different dialects being influenced by one another and taking over different features from each other. This does not necessarily mean that the process is one-sided or mutual because features from regional dialects, social dialects, or the standard language can take part in the levelling process (Siegel, 1985). Beaman (2021) asserts that dialect levelling commonly arises from comprehensive societal transformations, including industrialisation, urbanisation, agricultural advancement, and the growth and diversification of the workforce.

When the variation among dialects is minimised, some distinctive linguistic features may disappear in favour of newly developed features which are adopted by the speech community (Williams & Kerswill, 1999). For example, one of the distinguishing features of southern England and Cockney English is the replacement of the [t] by a glottal plosive [ʔ] in the intervocalic and word-final positions as in *letter* and *cut*. Sociolinguists have documented a wide spread of this feature across social and geographical space including areas like Hull and East Riding, affecting not only working-class varieties but making its way into Received Pronunciation as well (Williams & Kerswill, 1999). On the other hand, Byrne (2021) notes that some communities show resistance to dialect change. For instance, Liverpool English stands out for its tendency to resist the process of dialect levelling, particularly in the

context of T-glottalization, a feature that Merseyside adolescents display distinctiveness in by actively avoiding dialect levelling (Byrne, 2021).

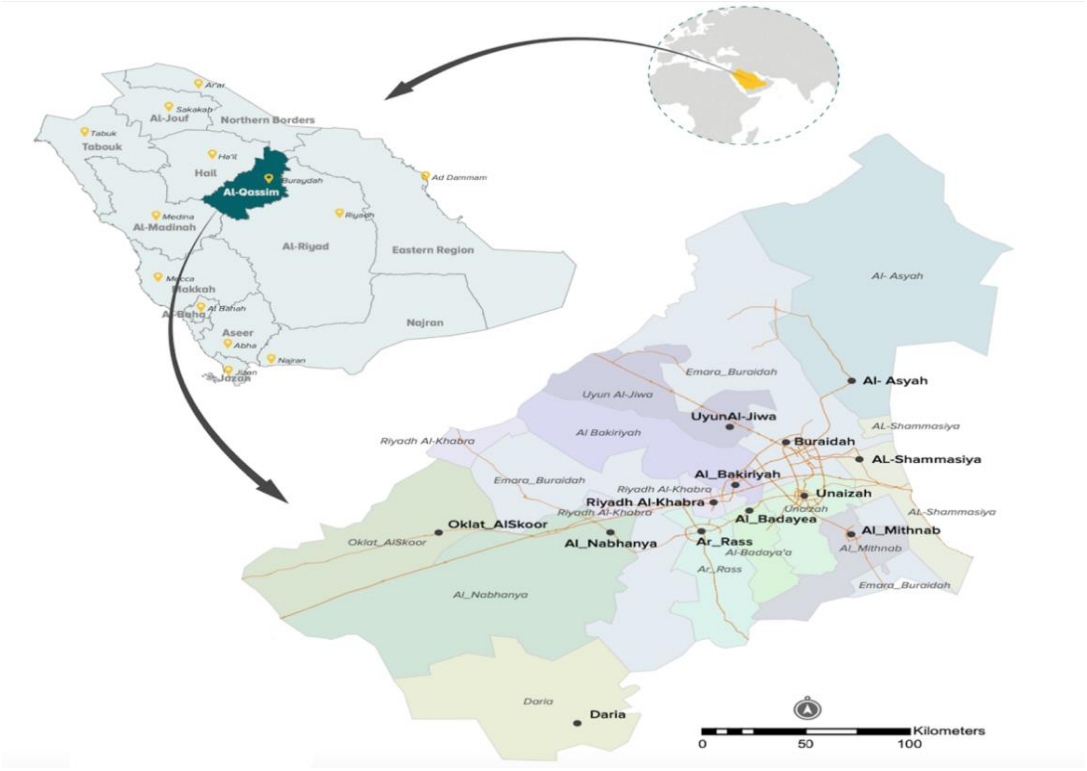
As globalization continues to expand and the population becomes increasingly intermixed in large urban regions throughout the world, dialect levelling represents an interesting phenomenon and topic of study for sociolinguistic researchers and practitioners (Henkin, 2016). The existence of this phenomenon has particularly impacted Arabic and its dialects, as individuals from Arab nations have migrated to seek better economic opportunities and more modern lifestyles. The result has been a mixture of languages, dialects, phrases, and syntactical structures that have transformed how traditional languages are spoken within the region (Hachimi, 2015).

Saudi Arabia is a vast country where many regional dialects are spoken. Accordingly, there is still a continuing need to examine the effects of language contact and accommodation on Saudi speakers' linguistic behaviour in different regions and how social variables like age, gender, and education may influence the way they speak.

1.2. Al Qassim Region, Overview

Saudi Arabia comprises of 13 administrative regions. Al Qassim, which is located at the centre of the kingdom also comprises of 13 governates. These governates include Buraidah (the regional capital), Al Asyah, Uyun Al Jiwa, Al Badaya'a, Al Bakiriyah, Daria, Al Mithnab, Al Nabhanya, Ar Rass, Riyadh Al Khabra, Al Shammasiya, Unaizah and Oklat AlSkoor (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A map of Al Qassim Governorates



Note. From Qassim Urban Observatory. (2020). (rep.). State of Urban Development in Al-Qassim, Key Statistics in 13 Urban Areas, 2020.

Being in the heart of Saudi Arabia, Al Qassim makes an important transit route between different parts of the country. It is connected by a network of highways, railways and air routes. Buraidah, Unaizah, and Ar Rass serve as the main urban centres of the region as home to a significant

percentage of the population. According to the Qassim Urban Observatory (2020), the majority of Al Qassim residents live in urban areas, with 47% of the region's population residing in Buriadah. Youth ranging from 15-34 account for 35.1% of the population, while those aged 35-59 represent 35.2 % of the population accounting for a high workforce throughout the region. Most cities in the region have recorded higher adult and youth literacy rates than the national and global averages (Qassim Urban Observatory, 2020).

1.3.Qassimi Arabic

There are two types of dialects spoken by the population in Qassim. First, the dialects of the main Bedouin tribes in the region which include Anizah, Utaibah, Subai', Dawasir, Harb, and Mutair to name a few. These tribes maintained their tribal dialects even after settling in sedentary areas. Second, Qassimi Arabic (hereafter QA) which is a dialectal variety of Najdi Arabic, is mainly spoken by the sedentary (hadari) population (Ingham, 1994).

It is estimated that QA dates back to the 13th and 16th centuries when people began settling in the region. QA is linguistically similar to other Najdi Arabic dialects such as the dialects of Sudair and Al Wasim. On a phonological and morphological level, QA shares some features with the Ha'il dialect (Al-Rojaie, 2013).

According to Al-Rojaie (2013), linguistic features originally used in Old Arabic dialects dating back to the pre-Islamic era are preserved in some Najdi Arabic dialects. Al-Ubudi (1979) described the three most salient linguistic features of QA. First, the deletion of /a/ in the singular object feminine suffix -ha. Second, the backing of the third-person masculine object/possessive pronoun -ah to become /uh/. Lastly, the deletion of /-i/ in the first object pronoun -ni.

The current study attempts to examine QA mainly spoken by the sedentary people who inhabit the major urban centres of the region. These include Buraydah, Unayzah, Ar Rass, and Al Bukayriyah as well as other smaller sedentary towns. Many authors and informants from the region maintain that QA presents slight differences among its speakers. There are limited lexical differences among speakers from different cities such as Buraydah and Unayzah, however, these lexical items are mostly old dialectal speech forms, mainly used by older generations. Other differences are suprasegmental which will not be addressed in this study (Al Saied, personal communication, 2022).

1.4. Purpose of the Study

This study will attempt to explore the extent of phonological and lexical levelling within the Qassimi dialect. The population of the study consists of two groups: urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives, and urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives. These regions include central, western, eastern, and northern regions. The data is expected to shed light on the lexical, segmental and syllabic changes that might occur due to dialect levelling in Najdi Arabic represented in the Qassimi dialect. The study also investigates whether the dialect under question is affected by extra-linguistic variables such as age, gender, and education. Results from this study may be beneficial to researchers in demonstrating how socioeconomic changes, intermixing, and migration have contributed to linguistic levelling.

A plethora of literature exists on levelling in different Arabic dialects, yet some notable gaps remain in the literature regarding Saudi Arabian regional dialects that warrant further attention. A few studies are very similar to the scope of the current reasearch, however, these studies only examined one levelling feature which is the deaffrication of [k] or kashkashah among Saudi speakers. The current study attempts to address this gap by further investigating the lexical as well as the segmental aspects of dialect levelling that may be found in the speech of Qassimi speakers.

The study seeks to address the following two research questions:

1. What are the lexical aspects of linguistic levelling found in Qassimi Arabic?
2. What are the segmental aspects of linguistic levelling found in Qassimi Arabic?
3. What are the influences of age, gender, and education on linguistic levelling in Qassimi Arabic?
4. What are Qassimi Arabic Speakers' perceptions and attitudes towards changes in their regional dialect?

Through addressing these research questions, results from this study are expected to lead to greater insight into how and why linguistic levelling has occurred, and if a possible new koine is emerging.

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Evidence of levelling has been documented in a wide variety of languages and settings. Many studies have illustrated how linguistic levelling has influenced speakers in the Middle East and the potential sociocultural impacts this process has, both on local populations and those with which they closely interact.

Numerous studies have indicated that variation patterns in a language can occur due to regional dialect levelling, and seminal texts on this subject have confirmed that Arabic has been subjected to levelling in urban areas where cultures and dialects are intermixed (Miller et al., 2007). Language levelling can be attested across Modern Arabic varieties spoken in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iraq, UAE, and Algeria (Al-Azraqi 2016; Al-Rojaie 2013; Al-Wer, 2007; Berlinches Ramos, 2020; Mohammed & Samad, 2020; Boukhechba, 2019; Hachimi 2015; Henkin 2016; Miller, 2004). Similar linguistic levelling phenomena have been noted in other languages including Persian (Samar et al., 2010), Greek (Fotiou and Grohmann, 2022), and Romani (Leggio & Matras, 2017).

2.1. Dialect Levelling in Saudi Dialects

Saudi Arabia covers a vast geographical area that includes 13 regions which are further subdivided into many governorates, cities, towns, and villages. A number of dialects are spoken in Saudi Arabia such as Najdi Arabic, which includes other subdialects spoken in Hail, Qassim, and Riyadh. Other dialects include Hasawi Arabic spoken in the eastern region, Bahrani Arabic spoken in Qatif, Hejazi dialect spoken in the western region, and South Arabian dialects spoken in the southern region such as Abha, Albahah, and Jazan dialects. In urban cosmopolitan Saudi cities, people from around the kingdom intermix and intermarry, giving rise to the phenomena of dialect levelling.

Al-Rojaie (2013) examined dialect levelling specifically within the Najdi dialect spoken in Qassim province in central Saudi Arabia. In Najdi Arabic, the /-k/ is usually affricated to [-t͡s] in the stem of the word as well as in the suffix. For example, the second-person singular feminine object/possessive suffix /-k/ in a word like [mink] 'from you', is affricated into [-t͡s], as in [mints]. The process of levelling has led to suffix-based deaffrication amongst all demographic groups in Qassim, although some differences were present based on age, education, and sex.

Similarly, Al-Azraqi (2007) examined the change from the old dialectal feature of kashkashah and kaskasah to the dialect-neutral suffix /k/ to indicate the second-person feminine singular object/possessive pronoun. Al-Azraqi (2007) concluded that, although kashkashah and kaskasah are the variants most rooted in dialects, the /k/ form is predominant in each of the five regions, which is also consistent with Al-Rojaie's (2013) findings. The predominance of /k/ was adduced as evidence for the emergence of a koine in Saudi Arabia.

Although some research has been produced about the subject of levelling in Arabic, some notable gaps in the literature remain that warrant further attention through empirical methods. Al-Rojaie's (2013), and Al-Azraqi's (2007) studies are very similar to the scope of the current reasearch,

however, the studies only examined one levelling feature which is the deaffrication of [k] or kashkashah among Saudi speakers. The current study is well situated to address this gap by further investigating the lexical as well as the segmental aspects of dialect levelling that may be found in the speech of Qassimi speakers.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design and Approach

A mixed method approach was found optimal to investigate how linguistic levelling has affected pronunciation and vocabulary choices in the dialect of Qassimi speakers. Data collection consisted of audio-recorded naturally occurring data which was generated using spontaneous conversations between native speakers of the dialect. This was followed by a questionnaire to gauge attitudes and perceptions towards dialect change. Recording talk-in-action that is naturally occurring offers researchers a window into how language is realised and organised in its natural setting as opposed to data elicited from other methods such as structured interviews (Golato, 2003). Results from this study are expected to lead to greater insights into how and why linguistic levelling has occurred in the Qassimi dialect. A specific framework used to analyse phonetic data is presented in the data collection and analysis section below.

3.2. Population and Sampling Approach

The population of interest in this study consists of a total of 60 speakers of the Qassimi dialect. The sample is divided into two main groups: 30 native Qassimi speakers of the dialect who reside in Qassim region and have lived there their entire lives, and 30 native Qassimi speakers who have resided in different Saudi regions most of their adult lives. This selection is to ensure a sample of individuals who speak the dialect fluently and have been subjected to dialect levelling due to dwelling in cosmopolitan cities in Saudi Arabia, and to understand the extent of dialect contact that has affected the process of linguistic levelling. The study employs a convenience sampling strategy to recruit informants from all demographic groups. The participants are divided according to gender, age, and education level. The study includes three major age groups (adapted from Al-Rojaie, 2013): young adults 18-29 (grew up after the socioeconomic changes); adults 30-45 (grew up during the socioeconomic changes); and middle aged and above 46+ (grew up before the socioeconomic changes). With regard to education level, participants are divided into three groups: high school education or less, undergraduate, and graduate.

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

To gain a proper understanding of how speakers of the Qassimi Dialect use their speech in normal conversational settings, it is important to capture natural conversational data. Golato (2003) argues that other data collection instruments can yield legitimate and informative results, however, recordings of naturally occurring data are better suited to describe actual language use. Moreover, structured interviews force responses and remind participants that they are involved in a research study. This could unintentionally create a Hawthorne effect, whereby participants will modify their speech in a way that they feel is “expected" by the researcher, presenting a threat to the internal validity of the study (Sedgwick & Greenwood, 2015). This would present some drawbacks as it may make respondents less comfortable to talk freely, especially with people they have never met before (Iida, 2005). Therefore, the collection of data in this study was from natural unprompted conversations with native speakers of the Qassimi dialect.

Conversations were recorded by the researcher, or a key informant. In situations where the researcher felt her presence may have an influence on the way participants spoke, a key informant was familiarised with the premise of the study and was instructed in detail on his/her role. Following transcription and phonetic coding, data analysis adhered to the recommendations of Labov’s (1972)

variationist framework. This framework involves the exploration of factors that influence phonological and linguistic variations. Specifically, this approach involves coding data to identify tokens and lexical items that are indicative of linguistic variation. Variations from Modern Standard Arabic and within the Qassimi dialect were used as evidence to support the degree to which levelling has occurred within this region. The collection of a large number of sentences within the sample permitted a quantitative analysis of variant distribution in the population sampled. This helped quantify the extent to which levelling has occurred within the sample in the region. As data will likely differ in length, about 5-7 minutes from each recording was used in the analysis, which amount to an average of 500-600 words per participant, taking into account pauses and turn-taking. This created a corpus of data that is similar in length for each participant. This approach prevents the content in the longer speech samples to skew the findings and distributes analysis of language patterns more evenly across the entire sample.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Two types of data were collected: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data included phonological levelling occurrences and lexical levelling occurrences from two sample groups, urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives (the QA group), and urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives (the SA group). Levelling occurrences were calculated from speech segments similar in length for each participant. Other information collected for the quantitative data included age, gender, and education level.

The qualitative data was obtained from three open-ended questions to gauge Qassimi Arabic speakers' perceptions and attitudes towards changes in their regional dialect. The questions are as follows:

1. Did the dialect you speak undergo any changes during your lifetime? And why?
2. If yes, do you think this change is negative or positive? And why?
3. Have you ever found yourself in a situation that required changes to your dialect? And why?

Other information collected during the qualitative data collection included gender, age, education level, dialect classification, and region (i.e., the QA group vs. the SA group).

4.1. Analysis results for quantitative data

The study samples included 30 urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives (the QA group) and 30 urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives (the SA group). Table 1 shows the demographics of the participants.

Table 1. Demographics for quantitative data

Gender	QA (N = 30)	SA (N = 30)	Total
Female	19 (63.3)	17 (56.7)	36 (60.0)
Male	11 (36.7)	13 (43.3)	24 (40.0)
Age			
18-29	17 (56.7)	10 (33.3)	27 (45.0)
30-45	6 (20.0)	12 (40.0)	18 (30.0)
46+	7 (23.3)	8 (26.7)	15 (25.0)
Education			
High school or less	7 (23.3)	6 (20.0)	13 (21.7)
Undergraduate	12 (40.0)	5 (16.7)	17 (28.3)

Graduate	11 (36.7)	19 (63.3)	30 (50.0)

Note. QA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives; SA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives.

Figure 2: Histogram plots of phonological (left) and lexical (right) levelling occurrences

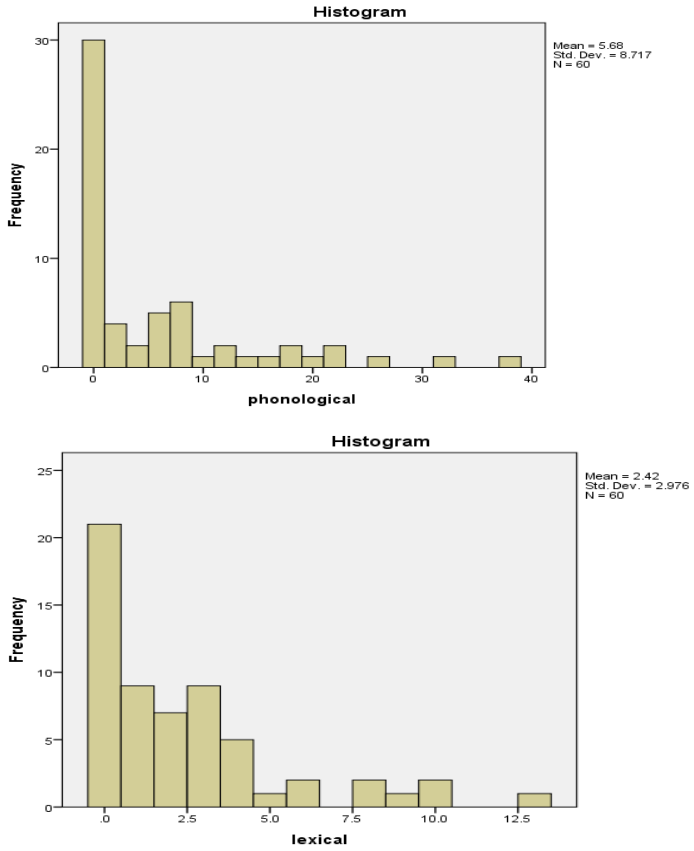


Table 2. *Descriptive statistics of phonological and lexical levelling occurrences*

	Overall		QA		SA	
	Phonological	Lexical	Phonological	Lexical	Phonological	Lexical
Mean	5.68	2.42	1.83	1.23	9.53	3.60
SD	8.72	2.98	3.02	1.79	10.72	3.45
Median	0.50	1.50	0	0.50	7.00	3.00
IQR	8	3	4	2	18	4

Note. QA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives; SA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives.

The study's quantitative dimensions examined the statistical rates of levelling that the sampled participants exhibited throughout the research process. The outcomes indicated that the aggregate population's phonological and lexical levelling occurrences exceeded normative rates. Based on these assessments, it was concluded that the subjects' lexical and segmental levelling demonstrated a high level of variation that required further assessment. The SA group exhibited higher rates of lexical levelling than the participants included in the QA sample. Further examination revealed some notable examples as the subjects levelled their utterances

at the lexical level. The following tables include some examples of levelled lexical items from each group.

Table 3. Levelled lexical items from the SA group

	Levelled item	QA Equivalent	SA Equivalent	English Equivalent
1	hadhi/hathi	dhi/thi	hadẖihi	this 'fem'
2	ạywah	Eih	naʿaṃ	yes
3	Ħasalat	sˤarat	ħasalat	happened
4	Keif	Shloon	keif kaỷfa	how
5	al'aan	alheen	al'aan ạlận	now

Note. The transliterations follow ALA-LC Romanisation Tables (Barry, 1997) Equivalents provided from Al-Mawrid: A Modern English-Arabic dictionary (Baalabaki, 1995).

Table 4. *Levelled lexical items from the QA group*

	Levelled item	QA Equivalent	SA Equivalent	English Equivalent
1	Kwaysah	zeinah/taibah	jayĭdaẗuⁿ	good/well
2	maẟsūṭ	farḥạṅ	maẟsūṭ /saʿīḏ	happy
3	lakin	bas	lakin/lakinã	but
4	keif	shloon	keif kaỷfa	how
5	barḍūh	ba'ad	'aydhan ạảỷḍaⁿ	also

An in-depth review of both populations indicated that the aggregate subjects likely engaged in lexical levelling processes as they responded to three primary factors. First, the groups' speech patterns reflected their educational levels and signified their attempt to align their utterances with the standards associated with Modern Standard Arabic (hereafter MSA). Secondly, the social influences of urbanisation and related developments potentially influenced their linguistic strategies (Almalki, 2023). Finally, the participants relied on patterns of expression that may have allowed them to simplify their pronunciation.

A review of both groups' segmental levelling identified six primary trends that marked and defined the population's speech. The subjects exhibited a tendency to utilise deaffrication as they changed their pronunciation towards the standard. Secondly, the participants replaced the voiced velar stop /g/ with the voiceless uvular stop /q/ in ways that marked their awareness of MSA conventions. A third trend is reflected in the group's replacement of the dark /ɬ/ with the light /l/ when the consonant is placed before a vowel. The population additionally tended to abandon Qassimi Arabic's unique presentation of the female pronoun. A fifth example reflected the group's replacement of a Qassimi Arabic dialectical preposition in favour of an MSA variant. Finally, some of the population shifted their dialect's unique use of the male

pronoun. The collective changes observed in the group's segmental aspects of their performative levelling referenced their awareness of the differences between QA and MSA conventions and their perceived need to align their linguistic performance with the standard.

Regional Differences

A review of the study's statistical data compared the two groups in terms of their frequency of engaging in types of linguistic levelling. The data indicated that the SA group, composed of individuals who lived in regions outside of Qassim, engaged in higher levels of levelling when compared with their QA group counterparts. These findings correlate with current research that views regional differences across Saudi Arabia as a factor that can influence a speaker's attitudes and linguistic strategies (Alshehri & AlShabeb, 2023).

Educational Level

The study's quantitative data indicated a significant difference between the subjects participating in both groups in terms of their educational background. According to these findings, the participants who reported as having completed high school or below tended to be 1.993% less likely to engage in phonological levelling processes than college graduates. The same demographics were also 2.430% less likely to engage in these same processes than the undergraduates. The data, however, did not identify a significant difference between college graduates and undergraduates.

Age

The participants reviewed in the study tended to be moderately diverse in terms of their ages. Among the 30 respondents who participated in the QA group, 17 were between the ages of 18 and 29. An additional 6 subjects were between the ages of 30 and 45. Finally, 7 participants were aged 46 or above. The secondary control group consisted of 10 persons between the ages of 18 and 29; 12 between 30 and 45; and 8 aged 46 or above. Despite this diversity, the populations did not exhibit significant statistical divergences in terms of their ages. These findings indicated that other factors, including the participants' educational level and gender, tended to be more impactful in terms of their linguistic or phonological levelling.

Gender

The study's data indicated that gender-related variables tended to have a complex impact on internal and cross-group outcomes. At one level, these determinants did not influence comparative levels of lexical levelling. At the same time, this factor tended to impact internal group outcomes within the QA and SA based populations. A review of this determinant's effects, when compared with other variables, had the second highest outcome in lexical-related levelling. Females in the QA and SA groups also tended to engage more frequently in the process of lexical and phonological levelling.

4.2. Analysis results for qualitative data

607 subjects participated in the qualitative data collection (Table 6). Among them, 236 (37.0%) were urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives (QA) and 401 (63.0%) were urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different

urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives (SA). Majority of the subjects were female (76.6%) and had a college degree (77.9%). Nearly half of the subjects were at least 46 years-old (47.4%). Nearly half of the subjects (44.4%) considered their dialect as Qassimi. The demographics of the participants by region (QA vs. SA) were also presented in Table 6. The distribution of gender, age, education, and dialect classification between QA and SA were fairly similar. The subjects were mostly female (68.2% for QA and 81.5% for SA), were at least 46 years-old (48.7% for QA and 46.6% for SA), had a college degree (75.4% for QA and 79.3% for SA), and spoke in a Qassimi dialect (58.5% for QA and 36.2% for SA).

Table 6. Demographics for qualitative data

Gender	**QA (N = 236)**	**SA (N = 401)**	**Total (N = 637)**
Female	161 (68.2)	327 (81.5)	488 (76.6)
Male	75 (31.8)	74 (18.5)	149 (23.4)
Age			
18-29	45 (19.1)	61 (15.2)	106 (16.6)
30-45	76 (32.2)	153 (38.2)	229 (35.9)
46+	115 (48.7)	187 (46.6)	302 (47.4)
Education			
High school or less	37 (15.7)	57 (14.2)	94 (14.8)
Undergraduate	21 (8.9)	26 (6.5)	47 (7.4)
Graduate	178 (75.4)	318 (79.3)	496 (77.9)
Dialect classification			
White dialect	29 (12.3)	93 (23.2)	122 (19.1)
Qassimi	138 (58.5)	145 (36.2)	283 (44.4)
Najdi	33 (14.0)	84 (20.9)	117 (18.4)
Changes according to the place and people	33 (14.0)	76 (19.0)	109 (17.1)
Other	3 (1.2)	3 (0.7)	6 (1.0)

Note. QA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have lived in Qassim their entire lives; SA = urban speakers of Qassimi Arabic who have resided in different urban Saudi regions most of their adult lives. For dialect classification, "other" included: north, suitable, the dialect of Arab intellectuals, northern, and normal.

The qualitative data included the following open-ended questions, 1) Did the dialect you speak undergo any changes during your lifetime? And why?, 2) If yes, do you think this change is negative or positive? And why?, and 3) Have you ever found yourself in a situation that required changes to your dialect? And why?, these were used to answer RQ4 (What are Qassimi Arabic Speakers' perceptions and attitudes towards changes in their regional dialect?).

Nearly two-thirds of the participants (61.7% overall; 59.7% for QA and 62.8% for SA) indicated that the dialect they spoke underwent changes during their lifetime (Table 7). Several reasons that cause dialect changes were identified (Table 8). The number one reason participants believed that caused dialect changes was mixing with different cultures (20.6% overall; 19.5% for QA and 20.9% for SA). As pointed out by two subjects who came from Qassim region and lived in Qassim (the QA group), "because of the frequent mixing with non-Qassimis" and "the frequent contact with other cultures", cultural openness could lead to dialect change. Subjects who were from Qassim region and lived outside Qassim (the SA group) also echoed this opinion. For example, one from the SA sample claimed, "I was influenced by those around me from other regions, so I spoke, as they say, the dialect of

capitals" and the other suggested that "mixing with people from different regions is enough to change the dialect a little".

Living environment was also a big factor that may cause dialect changes, especially from the point of view of people from Qassim region and lived outside Qassim (the SA group) (16.3% overall; 9.7% for QA and 20.2% for SA). Living outside the Qassim region, "the influence of the surrounding environment, and the interaction with society and the external environment", as stated by an informant from the SA group, could lead to dialect change. Another SA informant elaborated this using himself as an example: "it changed a little because I moved to Jeddah and lived there for about 25 years, so some vocabulary changed because of the environment around me and the people I mixed with.".

Other reasons for dialect changes mentioned by the participants included

- Mixing of different generations: "because the new generations differ from us and do not understand some of our words" (quote from an SA);
- Mixing with other dialects: "it is natural that there is a change due to the full integration with the various other dialects" (quote from an SA);
- Urbanisation and convergence between regions: "The world has become a small village, close communication and many relationships, and we needed to replace some words to facilitate understanding, communication and conversation." (quote from an SA);
- Media promotion: "the reason is social media, which plays the biggest role in changing dialects" (quote from an SA);
- Evolution of words: "the disappearance of some words and their replacement with other words that are closer to understanding" (quote from a QA);
- Ease of communication: "the fact that some words in the dialect may not be understood by everyone, so some synonymous words from the Arabic language are introduced" (quote from an SA);
- Educational purpose: "because of the academic environment" (quote from an SA);

Table 7. *Did the dialect you speak undergo any changes during your lifetime?*

	QA (N = 236)	**SA (N = 401)**	**Total (N = 637)**
Yes	141 (59.7)	252 (62.8)	393 (61.7)
No	85 (36.0)	133 (33.2)	218 (34.2)
Don't know	2 (0.8)	3 (0.7)	5 (0.8)
No response	7 (3.0)	10 (2.5)	17 (2.7)
Invalid response	1 (0.4)	3 (0.7)	4 (0.6)

Table 8. Frequency (%) of reasons for dialect changes

	QA (N = 236)	SA (N = 401)	Total (N = 637)
Mixing of different generations	13 (5.5)	8 (2.0)	21 (3.3)
Mixing of different cultures	46 (19.5)	84 (20.9)	130 (20.4)
Mixing with other dialects	9 (3.8)	18 (4.5)	27 (4.2)
Living environment	23 (9.7)	81 (20.2)	104 (16.3)
Convergence between regions	16 (6.8)	10 (2.5)	26 (4.1)
Media promotion	12 (5.1)	3 (0.7)	15 (2.4)
Evolution of words	15 (6.4)	19 (4.7)	34 (5.3)
Ease of communication	6 (2.5)	12 (3.0)	18 (2.8)
Educational purpose	3 (1.3)	7 (1.7)	10 (1.6)
Urbanisation	8 (3.4)	6 (1.5)	14 (2.2)

Note. % was computed using the N for each group. % do not sum to 1 as each subject may endorse more than one reasons.

A total of 387 participants (135 QAs and 252 SAs) elaborated their opinions regarding the positive/negative aspects of dialect changes (Table 9). Overall, nearly 70% of the participants (67.7%), with slightly higher percentage of SAs (72.6%) than the QAs (58.5%), perceived dialect change as positive. Though, a small portion (16.3%), with slightly higher percentage of QAs (21.5%) than SAs (13.4%) perceived dialect change as negative.

Table 10 summarised the positive and negative aspects of dialect change. Facilitating communication with people using other dialects (25.1% overall; 21.5% for QA and 27.0% for SA) was the most regarded benefit of dialect change. As pointed out by an SA, dialect change is "a positive change in order to facilitate communication with the speakers of other dialects without prejudice to the essence of the Qassimi dialect". Dialect change "makes it easier to coexist with others" (quote from a QA), provide "ease of communication with others, especially from different regions of the Kingdom" (quote from a QA), and "increase understanding of other cultures" (quote from an SA). Dialect change can help communication because, as pointed out by an SA, "the development or change of the dialect in a way that makes the dialect understandable to the largest number of those around".

Despite of the positive aspects of dialect change, participants specified several negative aspects of dialect change. Dialect change could lead to lack of unique dialect (10.1% overall; 11.9% for QA and 9.1% for SA). Dialect change could "distance us [the study participants] from our Arabic language" (quote from a QA) and "lead to artificial speech and excessive thinking of terminology" (quote from a QA). Dialect change may also indicate "lack of self-confidence" (Quote from an SA).

Dialect change may result in loss of words/accent. An SA elaborated this negative aspect of dialect change: "Negative because it is necessary to keep the vocabulary and pass it on from generation to generation, but due to the openness to the outside world, the emergence of satellite channels and social media, the influx of expatriate workers and the entry of maids and drivers into the family structure, the dialect began to change with the entry of vocabulary from other dialects and sometimes some English words.". Loss of words may then lead to unrecognisable dialect for the new generation, as stated by a QA "some Najdi words have disappeared and are not known by the new generation". Finally, "because the dialect is our [study participants] identity" (quote of a QA), dialect change "strips us of our language and our environment" (quote of an SA). An SA emphasised, dialect change may introduce "the fear of losing an important part of the Qassim identity and the dialect of our fathers and grandfathers".

Table 9. *Dialect change perceived as positive/negative*

	QA (N = 135)	SA (N = 252)	Total (N = 387)
Positive	79 (58.5)	183 (72.6)	262 (67.7)
Negative	29 (21.5)	34 (13.4)	63 (16.3)
Positive and negative	8 (5.9)	11 (4.4)	19 (4.9)
Neutral	12 (8.9)	21 (8.3)	33 (8.5)
It depends	3 (2.2)	0	3 (0.8)
Don't know	4 (3.0)	3 (1.2)	7 (1.8)

Table 1. *Frequency (%) of positive and negative aspects for dialect changes*

Positive	QA (N = 135)	SA (N = 252)	Total (N = 387)
Facilitate communication	29 (21.5)	68 (27.0)	97 (25.1)
Dialect inheritance	3 (2.2)	8 (3.2)	11 (2.8)
Dialect integrity	3 (2.2)	7 (2.8)	10 (2.6)
Suit external conditions	5 (3.7)	16 (6.3)	21 (5.4)
Accommodate diverse cultures	7 (5.2)	17 (6.7)	24 (6.2)
Accommodate diverse dialects	13 (9.6)	30 (11.9)	43 (11.1)
Negative			
Lack of unique dialect	16 (11.9)	23 (9.1)	39 (10.1)
Lack of self-confidence	0	1 (0.4)	1 (0.3)
Disappearance of words	4 (3.0)	5 (2.0)	9 (2.3)
Loss of accent	2 (1.5)	4 (1.6)	6 (1.6)
Dialect unrecognizable by new generation	3 (2.2)	3 (1.2)	6 (1.6)
Loss of identity	8 (5.9)	13 (5.2)	21 (5.4)

N*ote. % was computed using the N for each group. % do not sum to 1 as each subject may endorse more than one reasons.*

Nearly 70% (Overall 69.7%; 69.1% for QA and 63.3% for SA) of the participants were in a situation that required changes to their dialect (Table 11). The situation was mostly because of the needs of ease of communication (overall 59.2%; 61.0% for QA and 58.1% for SA) (Table 12) with people of other regions of SA (non-Qassim) (n = 73), people of Qassim (n = 3), Arabians of other countries (n = 41), and foreigners (non-Arabians) (n = 14), and when traveling (n = 3). As pointed out by an SA, "because of the lack of understanding of the other parties and the use of Standard Arabic", they needed to change their dialect to ensure the other party understands them. A QA described a similar situation when he needed to change his dialect for ease of communication as "when I am in the company of those who are not from Qassim, I have to change the pronunciation of the words a little so that the conversation is understandable.". Changing dialects can "shorten the time and ease the effort in explaining and clarifying" (quote from a QA).

Work needs and education needs could also encourage participants to change their dialects. For example, a QA indicated that changing dialects was necessary "when I work in the banking field, due to the different cultures there". Similarly, an SA added "in the field of education, we must speak in a dialect that everyone understands".

Participants seemed to change dialects in public places, such as hospitals, tourist places, airports, and government departments. For example, an SA stated: "in the workplace, hospitals and public places where foreigners and Saudis from other regions are present". Participants also seemed to change dialects for the needs of children and elderly. For example, an SA stated: "because some elderly women in some areas, especially in the south, do not understand the dialect of the people of Qassim, and we must modify our dialect". Finally, participants may change dialect to avoid prejudice. An SA elaborated her own experience:

> "Yes, in some places I do not have the desire for others to know which region I belong to, so I speak in a white or Najd dialect, for various reasons: prejudices against those who belong to Qassim / tribalism, issuing judgments and generalising about the region / my desire for others to deal with me according to my personality, education and upbringing, and not because I am from the region / some are curious and ask about relatives and lineages."

Although most people experienced situations that required changes to their dialects, some participants stated that they had no such experience. Because "I am proud of my language" (quote of a QA), "my love for my dialect and my self-confidence" (quote of a QA), and "our dialect is rich in vocabulary, beautiful, and widely accepted by others" (quote of a QA), they never need to change their dialects. However, two participants did mention that there were situations that "some precise terminology may need to be explained for those outside the region if they do not understand it from the context".

Table 2. *In a situation that required changes to the dialect*

	QA (N = 236)	SA (N = 401)	Total (N = 637)
Yes	163 (69.1)	281 (63.3)	444 (69.7)
No	61 (25.8)	103 (25.6)	164 (25.7)
No response	12 (5.1)	14 (3.5)	26 (4.1)
Invalid response	0	3 (0.7)	3 (0.5)

Table 3. *Frequency (%) of situation that required changes to the dialect*

	QA (N = 236)	SA (N = 401)	Total (N = 637)
Facilitate communication	144 (61.0)	233 (58.1)	377 (59.2)
Work needs	8 (3.4)	15 (3.7)	23 (3.6)
Education needs	0	3 (0.7)	3 (0.5)
In public places (e.g., hospitals)	3 (1.3)	5 (1.2)	8 (1.3)
Avoid prejudice	3 (1.3)	3 (0.7)	6 (0.9)
Children needs	2 (0.8)	4 (1.0)	6 (0.9)
Elderly needs	0	3 (0.7)	3 (0.5)

Note. % was computed using the N for each group. % do not sum to 1 as each subject may endorse more than one reasons.

5. CONCLUSION

This mixed-methods study on linguistic levelling of Qassimi Arabic posed research questions that collectively focused on the frequency and characteristics of phonological and lexical levelling of the dialect. The single most important finding is that, while linguistic levelling of Qassimi Arabic was frequent, it was driven more by dialect speakers' desires for improved communication and coexistence with speakers of other dialects than by external pressures from school and work. The results of the study show that speakers of Qassimi Arabic engaged in spontaneous levelling of their dialect for prosocial reasons, for reasons having to do with fitting in, or, in limited cases, because of an active fear of being judged.

The underlying theme of practical communication seems to be the diving factor for linguistic levelling among Qassimi Arabic speakers. The literature indicates that there can be many other drivers of such levelling, including issues of cultural prestige, avoiding prejudice, or the standardisation of

dialect in the workplace or educational settings. The relative scarcity of these motivations in the context of this study suggests that the linguistic levelling of the Qassimi Arabic dialect is driven primarily by practical considerations related to improving communication with speakers of other dialects. Moreover, the finding that women were more likely to engage in both phonological and lexical levelling, combined with the finding that the main driver for such levelling has to do with communication, strongly suggested a confluence between gender, dialect, and communication—with one possible interpretation being that women are either more concerned about fitting in, being understood, or sharing the communication conventions of speakers of other dialects.

The study identified specific elements of the Qassimi Arabic dialect that are subject to levelling. This identification is a contribution to the relatively limited literature on linguistic levelling as it occurs in contemporary Saudi Arabia (al-Rojaie, 2023). Although the Qassimi Arabic dialect has been studied before with respect to linguistic levelling (al-Rojaie, 2023; Alkhamees, 2023), another contribution of this study was to apply mixed methods to gain more insight into how and why particular types of levelling are taking place or not taking place. Solely quantitative or qualitative studies on this topic have, because of their intrinsic methodological limitations, not been able to contribute findings that are comparably rich and explanatorily powerful.

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