A phonetic case study of a bidialectal speaker of Lebanese and Palestinian Arabic

Lebanese and Palestinian Arabic are both in the subfamily of Levantine Arabic, which also includes Syrian and Jordanian Arabic (e.g., Fischer & Jastrow, 1980). Phonologically, the two varieties are fully mutually intelligible, with consistent differences. One often-noted difference is a pattern whereby in certain phonetic environments the vowel /a/ in Palestinian Arabic (and many other varieties) is raised to /e/ in Lebanese Arabic. This feature is known as *'imala*, and is one of the characteristic features of the Lebanese accent (e.g., Levin, 2011).

The sociolinguistic situation in Lebanon is complex, and Palestinians often experience negative judgments, thus motivating them to adapt their accents to the Lebanese accent, despite having grown up and often still living in Palestinian communities (Fityan, 1981; Hanafi, 2009; Sayigh, 1979 Traboulsi, 2007). "[M]any Palestinian refugees, aware early on in their lives that they speak differently than Lebanese and mindful that the identity their particular speech pattern transmits is sometimes met with judgmental reaction, might be compelled to limit the degree of linguistic distinctiveness between themselves and others." (Hennessey, 2011: p.118). At the same time, the Palestinian accent also maintains a covert prestige (Labov, 1994a,b), due to "the hostility of the environment surrounding them, as evidenced by years of involvement in the Lebanese Civil War...The result is often a very dense system of Palestinian centered social networks...the strength of [these] and the support systems that they offer are exaggerated in the case of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon" (Hennessey, 2011: p.20).

Previous research on the speech of Palestinians living in Lebanon found that as Palestinians from the Al-Jilal camp integrated more with the surrounding Lebanese communities, dialect variation emerged, with some people maintaining Palestinian speech patterns and some adapting to Lebanese patterns, depending on the social situation and factors such as age and gender (Fityan, 1981). The result is a bidialectal population, who codeswitch depending on whether they are speaking with Palestinians or Lebanese. The amount of codeswitching and the extent of adoption of Lebanese speech patterns is a function of many factors, including age, education, amount of interaction with Lebanese people, and religion (Fityan, 1981; Hennessey, 2011).

The current study is a pilot case study of one bidialectal speaker of Palestinian and Lebanese Arabic, a male aged 33 who grew up in a Palestinian community and who regularly interacts with Lebanese people. The advantages of examining bidialectal speakers is that it controls the variable of speaker, thus avoiding confounding factors. Recordings were made of 5 cognate words that have different vowel pronunciations (due to *'imala*) in the two varieties. The speaker produced each word 3 times as if he were speaking to a Lebanese person, and then to a Palestinian person. (The salient nature of codeswitching and its relevance in society for Palestinian speakers means that they are highly aware of the differences and have no trouble producing them through elicitation.) The results of examining spectrograms show clear differences in the direction expected, with the speaker producing the words in his Palestinian accent with /a/ or /æ/ and in his Lebanese accent with /e/. This can be seen in the figure below, where the Lebanese pronunciation has a lower F1 (first formant) and higher F2 than the Palestinian pronunciation. This is acoustic evidence of the Lebanese vowel being higher and fronter than the Palestinian vowel.

While this project is in its infancy, the scarcity of such research on the dialects involved as well as the sociolinguistic implications add to the importance of research on this topic. It is planned for the study to eventually expand into a quantitative analysis of both elicited and real-life conversational speech examining a wider variety of phonetic characteristics of codeswitching.
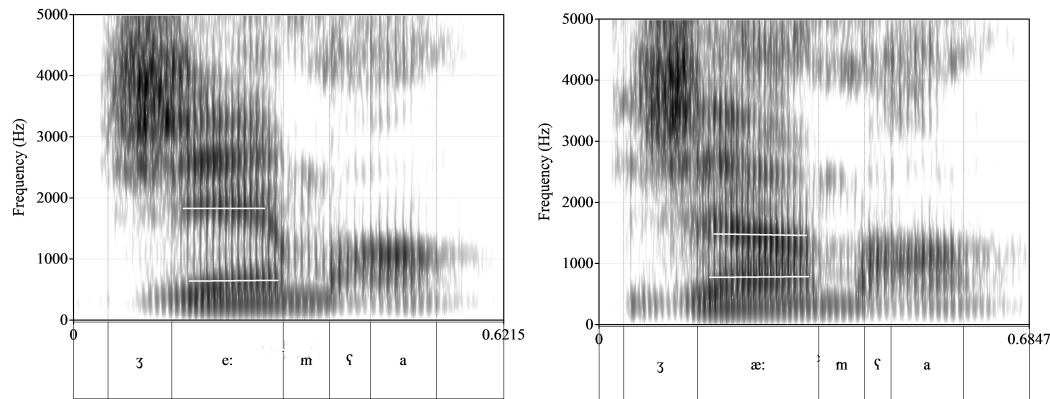
The word ['ʒemʕa]/['ʒæmʕa] ('university') in Lebanese (left) and Palestinian (right), with formants of the relevant vowel marked in white.

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