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The /q/ Variant in the Arabic Dialect of Tunisia

Mahmoud El Salman*

This article is a sociolinguistic study conducted in Tunisia to investigate the linguistic variation in the speech of 48 informants who are originally from the rural areas in Tunis but now living in Tunis, the capital. The interviews were carried out in the area during the period 1 June 2006 to 1 August 2006. As the /q/ variant of the (Q) variable is the key feature of the Tunisian dialect, it will be used as a basis to investigate this variation. The study shows that the [g] variant has started to be abandoned in the speech of rural Tunisians living in the capital in favour of the [q] variant. The [q] is adopted by rural people as it is a key feature of SDL (supra dialectal low) rather than it is the key feature of SA (Standard Arabic) though it happens that [q] is part of SA and SDL phonetic inventory. Where the SA feature happens to differ from that of the SDL of the same variable, the SA was abandoned in favour of the SDL feature. Though both males and females adopt the (q) variant but sociolinguistically they aim to achieve different aims. Females adopt the [q] as it is considered prestigious through its association with urbanisation and softness. Males adopt the [q] because of the social meaning it has as a local variant.

Introduction

The linguistic situation of Tunisia is characterised by diglossia in the sense used by Ferguson (1959), and bilingualism (El Arbi 2000). Arabic is the official language as "set out in the first article of the constitution of the Tunisian Republic, promulgated in 1957, which clearly proclaims that Islam is its religion, Arabic is its language" (Salhi 2000:32). The diglossic continuum is anchored at the "high" (H) end to the Classical Arabic (CA), and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). At the lower end of the diglossic continuum is Tunisian Arabic (TA) (El Arbi 2000).

This article examines the use of the [q] variant of the (Q) variable in the Arabic dialect of rural Tunisians who migrated from rural areas such as AlKaf, Qassrayn and Qafsah to Tunis City. Thus, it is a contribution to Arabic sociolinguistic. The /g/ variant of the (Q) variable is the native variant in these rural areas. The [q] variant of the (Q) variable is the native variant of Tunis, the capital. The [q] variant is associated with the code of prestige in Tunisia in that it is the native variant of the urban

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areas. Part of this prestige also comes as a result of considering this variant as the native variant of SA (Standard Arabic). The [g] variant, by contrast, is perceived as unrefined, coarse or tough variant as it is the variant of the rural people. This impression was confirmed by discussions the author had with his informants after the formal interviews.

Following Introduction, Section II discusses the methodology used in this study. Section III discusses the general significance of the (Q) variable. Section IV contains findings and discussion. Section V is a conclusion.

Methodology

This study is empirical in its methodology in that it is fully dependent on natural speech. All of the interviews were conducted in Tunis, the capital, in a face to face setting to obtain data with regard to linguistic variation.

The interviews were conducted in shops, offices, houses, and workshops using tape recordings. This was determined by the availability of the informants. The study includes a total of 48 informants, comprising Tunisians who are originally from rural areas. The interviews were conducted by the author.

The sample was divided into three kinds of groups, according to education, sex, and age. In order to gain a statistically accurate view of the use of the variables, a univariate analysis is employed. For purposes of the univariate analysis, each group is presented as a number. On the parameter of level of education, the uneducated group is presented as 1 and the educated group as 2. On the parameter of sex, the male group is 1 and the female group is 2. On the parameter of age, the young age group is 1, the middle age group is 2 and the old group is 3.

The (Q) Variable

The Standard Arabic voiceless uvular stop (Q) is in many areas the most salient phonological feature by which speakers of colloquial Arabic varieties can be identified. It has at least 5 reflexes: [q], [g], [k], [dʒ], and [ʔ]. "In the standard configuration, well known in the Levant, Iraq, and Egypt, the variant [q] is profiled for higher register, formality, education, Arabic nationhood, whereas other variants ([k], [ʔ], [g], etc.) are ethnically specific, or associated with the local prestige" (El Salman 2003b:413). However, in Tunisia the [q] is also the native variant and it

is the variant associated with local prestige. The primary route by which the [q] has reached Tunisia is the Arabs who came from the Arabian Peninsula and “began their expansion in the seventh century during the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed” (Klotchkoff 1999:20). The Arabic language was imposed on Tunisia by the nomadic Beni Hillal Bedouins (Arawi 1992, Klotchkoff 1999). Another route might have been the direct borrowing of many SA lexical items which led them to be used in full with their SA pronunciation. Daher (Daher 1998), for example, noticed that the latter was the primary route by which [q] reached DA (Damascus Arabic):

The most noteworthy symbols used in transcribing Arabic words are: /ʔ/ glottal stop, /q/ voiceless uvular stop, /g/voiced velar stop, /t/ emphatic voiceless alveolar (or denti-alveolar) stop, /d/ emphatic voiced alveolar (or denti-alveolar) stop, /θ/ /voiceless interdental fricative, /ð/ voiced interdental fricative to / ð/ emphatic voiced interdental fricative, /s/ emphatic voiceless alveolar fricative, /ʃ/ voiceless alveolar fricative, /ʒ/ voiced alveolar (or palato- alveolar) fricative, /dʒ/ voiced alveolar (or palato alveolar) affricate, /g/ voiced velar fricative, /h/ voiceless pharyngeal fricative, /ħ/ voiced pharyngeal fricative.

The (Q) variable has two variants in Tunisia: the voiceless uvular stop [q] and the voiced velar stop [g]. The [ʔ] variant which is an impotent social marker found in the Levant is not part of the phonological system of the native dialect of Tunisia (Walters 2000). The [q] is the variant used in the urban areas while the [g] is the variant used in the south. When the Arab invaders came to Tunisia, “a few Berber families fled from the different invaders and retreated to the mountains and Saharan region of the deep South” (Klotchkoff 1999:20). We believe that the [q] dominated in the urban areas as it is the native variant of the language of the newcomers. But the [q] was realised as [g] in the south as Arabic was not the native language of those Berbers who fled toward the south but, rather, it was acquired by them as a second language at the beginning at least. We speculate, thus, that the native languages of the Berbers, though these languages themselves which had the [g] variant, despite “dying out in the villages in the south of the country” (Salhi 2000:31), affected in one way or another the way they pronounced the [q]. Later, however, it seems that the new generation began using it as it was used by their ancestors. That also does not rule out the possibility that the dialect of the group of Arabs who stayed in the south at the beginning of the arrival of Arabs had the [g] rather than the [q] as part of its phonetic inventory. Indeed, other groups of Arabs came from areas other than the

Arabic peninsula to Tunis. According to Klotchkoff "Under the third caliph Othman, the Arabs made their first incursion into Tunisia (647), but it was not until Mu'Awiyah, the fifth caliph (661-680), and founder of Damascus Umayyad dynasty, that the Arabs really began to take root in the Maghreb" (Klotchkoff 1999:20). This entails that Arabs from greater Syria, which is also known as Billad I sham, which includes Syria, Jordan Lebanon and Palestine, were also given the chance to come to Tunisia during the years 661-680 as invaders under the leadership of Umayyad caliphs who took Damascus as their capital. The coexistence of the two variants [q] and [g] in the Arabic dialect existed long ago. According to Blanc (1964), (Q) has undergone several changes. Some of these are related to the group of dialects described by Blanc as *geltu*-dialects (the dialects characteristic of Bedouin people) and others to the group of dialects described as *qeltu* dialects (the dialects related to urban and rural regions, which constituted the sedentary Arab population. Thus, the Arabs who came to Tunisia to spread Islam came from different areas where different dialects of Arabic could be used. The [g] is possibly the native variant of a dialect used by one of these groups. The [q] is the prestigious variant in Tunisia while the [g] is the stigmatised one. The [q] at the beginning, at least, might have inherited the prestige as it was the dialect of the group who came from the Arab peninsula, in particular which had the prestige of its being the dialect of the Tribe to which Prophet Mohammed himself belongs. But later it might have the prestige, or at least maintained having a prestige it had already had, as it became the variant used in the urban areas of Tunisia. It is not the sound of [q] which receives stigma or prestige but rather the social meaning it has. Labov (2001:28) states that "social affect is not in fact assigned to the very surface level: it is not the sounds of language which receives stigma or prestige, but the use of a particular allophone for a given phoneme." The social meaning of the [q] varies from place to place as the referential meaning of a given word might vary from place to place. Its value varies from place to place. The [q], which was highly stigmatised in Haifa (El Salman 2003b) or in Damascus (Daher 1998), or in Bahrain (Holes 1996), is the prestigious variant in Tunisia. And the [g] variant which is stigmatised in Tunisia is the prestigious variant in Bahrain (Holes 1996) and Jordan (Al-Wer 1991). The [q] maintains the prestige attached to it because it is the SA variant only when it is used with words classified as SA words (Al Khatib 1988), or when it is used in domains where SA is the unmarked code (See Ferguson 1959) to be used. The [q] is preserved in Tunis or adopted as the local variant and the variant used in an urban area so it is accepted in all domains and with all words. The [q] was observed to be abandoned in many places when it was perceived as the variant of rural people (El Salman 2003b, Daher 1998) or when it was perceived as the variant of immigrant people (El

Salman and Dickins 2004) or when it was perceived as the variant of shi'i Muslims (Holes 1996). Unlike in the West, where Standard languages and prestigious codes are equated, in the Arab world "Standard and prestige varieties in a language need not coincide" (Ibrahim 1986). The [q] used in Tunisia was not preserved or adopted as a result of the speaker's wish to identify himself or herself with the SA code in that it was largely used with words classified as purely colloquial words (see Abdel-Jawad 1981, Al Khatib 1988), such as /yq'ido/ 'they do', /qadisha kuber/ 'how big'. Once the use of the [q] might lead the speaker to appear as non-local or immigrant as the local variant is another variant, say, the [g] in Jordan or the in Damascus, the speaker shows readiness to abandon the [q] in favour of the local variant and its being viewed as a SA variant does not stop the process.

To sum up, the speaker might avoid using the [q] in other areas for three reasons as this might lead them to be ridiculed or looked down upon: (1) if it is used in domains, such as the marketplace or one's neighbourhood, where SA is not expected and so it would be the marked code; (2) if it can be stereotypically associated with the code of the rural areas; and (3) if it is readily identified with the code of immigrants or minority. Given this, the prestige given to the [q] used in Tunisia comes as a result of its being the native variant of the local dialect and its being associated with the forces of urbanisation, modernisation, progress and social mobility of Tunis city society. In other words, the [q] is preserved or adopted as it is a linguistic feature of a supra-dialectal low (see Ibrahim 1986) but not as a linguistic feature of a supra dialectal high. However, Walters (2000:106) and El Arbi (2000:76) argue that MSA in Tunisia is used as a marker of social class, especially for those who grow up in urban communities in the home where both parents are well educated. We believe that a linguistic form can be used as a social marker if and only if it is part of the supra dialectal low (SDL) as only in this case are all of the speakers possible candidates to be stratified since SDL is acquired natively or at least has native speakers. Thus, [q] can be a social marker in Tunisia when it is part of SDL but not supra dialectal high (SDH) as the latter is only attainable at school and so millions of individuals in Tunisia who never attended schools could be "sociolinguistically unstratified" had it been not part of the SDL phonetic inventory. The [q] is mastered in Tunisia as it is the local colloquial variant of Tunisian dialect. As such, [q] is used in all of the domains and in all domains it is an unmarked code. So it is equally used by the educated and uneducated.

The Statistical Programme for Social Sciences (SPSS) used for data analysis shows that education is not significant in the use of the [q] variant among the informants. The threshold for significance is $p < 0.05$, while $p < 223$). We believe that prestige is attached to the linguistic form

as it is part of a SDL but not as it is part of a SDH. It just happens that the [q] variant of the (Q) variable is the variant of the SDL in Tunisia and it is the variant of the SDH. Had the SDL and the SDH been different, the former would have shaded into the latter. And in this case we would not be able to say that MSA is used as a social marker but the SDL. Our argument relies on many studies where the SDL linguistic forms were chosen to reflect the prestige and the SDH linguistic forms were abandoned when the two forms do not happen to be the same. So, it is not the SDH which was used to reflect a prestigious class, rather the SDL. Or else, the use of MSA by the educated in Tunisia is to be interpreted as it has been interpreted in other areas of the Arab world, a desire to reflect a high level of education in the educational hierarchy, rather than a high class in a social stratification. MSA can exclude or include a speaker from being educated or uneducated. However, it cannot stratify him or her in a certain class. To assume that the SMA is a social marker would, as Ibrahim (1986) puts it, "entail that all speakers of Arabic who have no functional knowledge of H [SA] are sociolinguistically unstratified" (Ibrahim 1986) as SA is not acquired natively by any individual and it is learning it is a function of formal instruction and education (Ibrahim 1986, Amara et al. 1999).

The point we wish to show here is that the sympathy for and the wish of an Arab to use the SA because it is the dialect of his glorious history or his religion does not rule out his readiness to adopt another variant rather than the SA variant once the "cost" (for example, appearing as a rural or immigrant person) of using the SA variant outweighs the "reward" (see Myers-Scotton 1996) he might gain from using the [q]. This fact has been assured from the result of three studies conducted by El Salman 2003a, 2003b, 2004 in Karak (Jordan), Irbid (Jordan) and Damascus. The [q] as a SA variant has the chance to be used and appear in the speech of the informants only when it is used with words classified as SA words (see Al Khatib 1988) or in domains where the use of SA is preferable (see Ferguson 1959). The [q] is used to identify oneself with the code of the original group to which one belongs, or the local group with which one wishes to associate oneself with is found with words classified as colloquial, or even with loan words borrowed from a language other than Standard Arabic such as *qabaday* "courageous", or *qahwagi* "coffee maker" (which are basically Turkish words) (El Salman and Dickins 2004). This, however, does not rule out the possibility that educated Tunisians might use [q] as a result of an attempt to standardise their speech in some domains or with words classified as SA words as "the lexical status of the word in which the variable occurs is very significant to the application of the (Q) standardisation rule with standard words favouring it most, while colloquial words heavily disfavour the rule" (Abdel-Jawad 1981:209).

However, once the [q] variant is the variant of the native dialect as in the case of Tunis, the capital, both colloquial and SA words heavily favour it, and in the case where the use of the [q], by those who have already abandoned it in favour of other variants of the (Q) variable, such as [g] or [ʔ], might come as an attempt to make their speech conform to the original dialect of their village, it is not uncommon to find it even used in words classified as purely colloquial words (El Salman and Dickins 2004), especially when these words known to be related to their village and its environment.

The (Q) Variable Used by Rural Tunisians: Findings and Discussion

In this section we will discuss the use of the (Q) variable by rural Tunisians living in Tunis city. Table 1 shows the distribution of informants by sex and age. The members of the study was divided into [g]-preservers and [q]-adopters.

Table 1. Distribution of Informants by Sex and Age

Age \ Sex	M	F	Total
Young	8	8	16
Middle	8	8	16
Old	8	8	16
Total	24	24	48

[Q] Adopters

As far as [g] is concerned, we are satisfied they come from parents who still preserve the [g] variant in their speech (96). Table 2 shows that the [q] variant is used in 98.8 per cent of occurrences of the (Q) variable among young males and in 99.5 per cent of occurrences among young females.

Table 2. The Distribution of the Variable (Q) by Age and Sex.

Age \ Sex	M			F		
	[q]%	[g]%	N	[q]%	[g]%	N
Young	98.8	2.1	251	99.5	0.5	218
Middle	85	15	171	93	7	140
Old	45	55	307	53	47	201

The [q] variant is the urban variant. It is preferred by females as it is normal for females to adopt the prestigious urban variant, as they tend to

use the code identified as the code of prestige associated with the forces of urbanisation, modernisation and progress (Daher 1998, Al-Wer 1991, Eckert 1988). It is also not uncommon for young males to adopt the [q] as males prefer to use the localised variant (Milroy and Milroy 1997). So both females and males in Tunis city preserve the use of [q] but the social meaning they seek is different. It happens in Tunisia that the local colloquial variant is the same as the urban variant. So, both females and males use it similarly. But that both females and males share the use of the [q] variant in Tunisia does not mean that they behave linguistically the same, as the social meaning they both aim to achieve is different. The fact that both males and females in the Arab world behave linguistically differently is clearly seen and noticed once the variant which symbolises locality differs from the one symbolising urbanity. Indeed, "Variation according to gender appears to be universal" (Kroch 1996:27). We noticed in Jordan (Abdel-Jawad 1981, Al Wer 1991, Al Khatib 1988; El Salman 2003b) that females do not mind adopting the non-local variant [ʔ] in favour of the local [g] variant, once the non-local variant but not the local variant is the one that can achieve what the feminine stereotype demands- appearing a soft, modernised and urbanised speaker. We thus believe that males in Tunisia use the [q] variant as it is the feature which carries the social meaning of locality and symbolises Tunisian identity, while females use it as it is the variant which carries the social meaning of urbanity, softness and modernity. According to Milroy and Milroy, "males appear to favour more localised variants which carry some kind of identity-based social meaning in the local community, whereas females identify more with supra-local variants in speech" (Milroy and Milroy 1997:55). It just happens in Tunis, the capital, that the supra-local variant and the localised variant are the same.

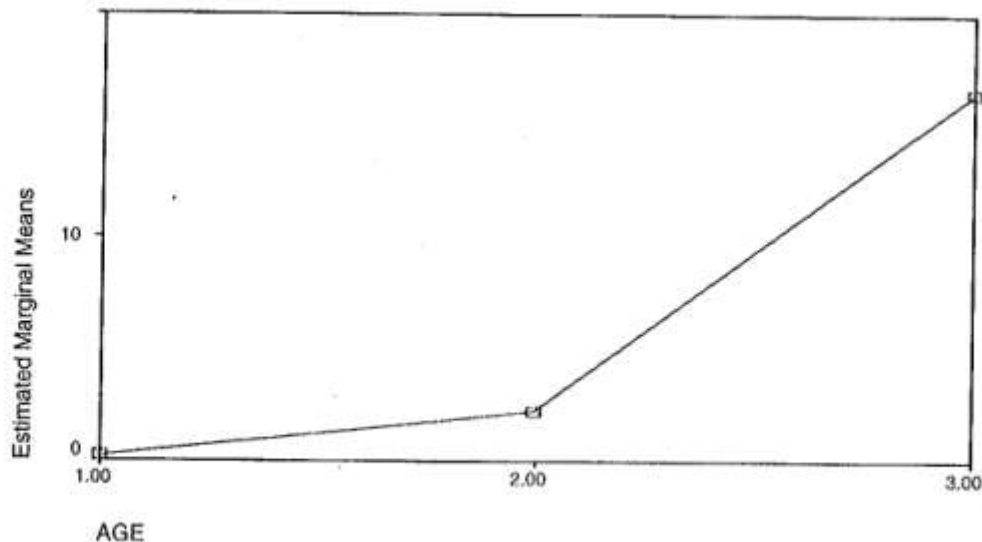
The question that might arise is why the [ʔ] variant succeeded in spreading into other Arab countries, such as Jordan, and to be adopted by females in these countries to reflect their desire to appear as more urbanised and prestigious while the [s] failed to spread into Tunisia and to become the supra-local variant to females at least? The answer is that "Jordan did not have any large urban centers" (Al-Wer 2000:30) with which a particular local variant could be associated and so the rural/Bedouin dichotomy was what prevailed in the Jordanian community. Females in Jordan needed to import an urban variant from the nearest known urban centers. As Jerusalem, Haifa, Akre, Damascus and Cairo were the closest urban centers, the variant used in these urban centers, namely, the [ʔ] variant, was taken to symbolise urbanity and prestige. It is also worth noticing that men, in general, in Jordan do not use the non-local [ʔ] variant as they are not meant by its urban facet and its being non-local variant contradicts their tendency to use localised variants. This confirms our argument that females in Tunis city seek the

urban characteristic of the [q] variant and males seek the local facet of it. The local/urban dichotomy is the two faces of the same coin for the [ʔ] variant. Unlike Jordan, Tunisia had big urban centers long ago (Klotchkof 1999) and a particular local variant is associated with it. Thus Tunisian females did not need to import another variant. That was also the reason why women in Damascus did not need a non-local variant to be used as a supra dialectal low variant as they already had an urban center to which a given local variant, namely, the [ʔ] variant, is related. But it is also worth noticing that females of the rural areas of Syria, where the [q] variant is used, and so where it is the variant related to rurality, show readiness to abandon it in favour of the [ʔ] variant in the same manner as the women of the rural areas of Tunisia show the same readiness to abandon the [g] in favour of the supra-local [q] variant. The variant that reflects this desire to appear more prestigious and urbanised might differ, but the desire itself remains to be the same – appearing localised in the case of males and modernised in the case of females.

[g] Preservers

The speakers who use the [g] variant are called [g] preservers. Table 2 shows that old males use the [g] variant in 55 per cent and females in 47 per cent of the total number of occurrences of the (Q) variable. SPSS confirms that age has very powerful significance in the use of the [g] variant (the threshold for significance is $p < 0.05$, while $p < .000$ for age in the use of the [g] variant). Figure 1 also shows this (Here the old age group is 3, the middle age group is 2 and the young age group is 1).

Figure 1. Estimated Marginal Means of G



The [g] variant is a highly stigmatised feature in the city. As a result, the variant is noticed to be preserved mainly by the old, for whom appearing modern is relatively unimportant. The background of the speakers who preserve it also confirms why it is not that important for them to preserve it and as a result appear as rural people among urban people. Most of them are very old, retired, have very humble jobs. In addition, being of this age may also give such speakers an excuse for not conforming to the local norms of speech; they grew up speaking this way and they are too old to change their speech habits. Le Page (1997) noticed that age can be a major obstacle in people's ability to change their way of speech. People in this age feel no need to use their way of speech to hold particular prestigious position among others; nor is there any pressure on them to do so since it is the norm for old people to speak in their native dialect. In addition, the old are subject to much more pressure from their society to preserve their native dialect than the young (Al-Wer 1991, Walters 1991). While the social pressure upon the old is the highest, the motive to adopt what it is perceived as prestigious is normally the lowest. The fact that the interviewer, myself, is a [g] user might have some role in the use of the [g] as "status relations are critical in determining the character of communicative behaviour in Tunisia" (El Arbi 2000:96). If it was not a matter of accommodating to my tongue in some cases, it would be a matter of feeling more free to use the [g] with a speaker whose native tongue has also the [g] variant. But it is to be noticed here that the reason why the author uses the same variant [g] in the same setting with the old differs from that which makes the old preserve it. While it is for the author the prestigious variant for males in Jordan as it "symbolises Jordanian identity" (Al-Wer 1991:75), it is the stigmatised variant in the capital context. The author's own use of the [q] variant while interviewing the [q] adopters is much more than it is while interviewing the [g] preservers. With [g] preservers it is used only with words which favour the [q] standardisation-rule as they are classified as SA. So, they are used with the [q] variant even in other settings. While with the [q] adapters, it is noticed to be used even with words classified as purely colloquial which confirms the author's impression that this comes as a result of linguistic accommodation.

Table 2 shows that members of the middle age group still preserve the [q] variant, though in a rate relatively lower than that used by the old. The members of the middle age group are relatively younger than the old and so they are relatively also less exposed to the society's pressure to follow the same linguistic norm. Middle-age females use the [g] in 7 per cent while males use it in 15 per cent. Though there is a slight difference in the use of the [g] by males and females, it is an indicator that females who are always ahead in linguistic innovation and they always lead in this process. It is not unexpected to find that females lead in sound

change as "it has been established that women commonly lead in sound change" (Eckert 1997:154). It is not uncommon to find that the old in Tunis also show readiness to use the [q]. Indeed, the [q] is also used with words classified as purely colloquial by four-old informants interviewed in their villages. These four were not part of the 48 sample, but just interviewed to make the necessary comparison, if needed, between the dialects of the rural Tunisians as it is used in the rural areas without being exposed to the pressure of the city life. It is also expected to see the prestigious [q] variant to start spreading to the rural areas as linguistic innovation spread essentially in wavelike fashion . . . [from] centers of prestige outward" (Mesthrie 2000:55).

Conclusion

The [g] variant has started to be abandoned in the speech of rural Tunisians living in the capital in favour of the [q] variant. The [q] is adopted by rurals as it is a key feature of SDL rather than it is the key feature of SDH, though it happens that [q] is part of SDH and SDL phonetic inventory. Where the SA feature happens to differ from that of the SDL of the same variable, the SA was abandoned in favour of the SDL feature. The [q] variant of the (Q) variable has its prestige as it is the variant used in a big urban center, namely Tunis City, rather than it is the SA variant. Though both females and males behave similarly with regard to the use of the [q] variant sociolinguistically they behave differently, as the social meaning they wish to identify themselves with is different. Females adopt the [q] variant because of the urban and soft facets it has. Males adopt the [q] as it is the local variant of Tunis city. This different linguistic behaviour might be clearer when these two social meanings are conveyed through two different variants of the same variable. For example, in many studies in the Arab world (Abdel-Jawad 1981) males showed tendency to adopt the variant which carries the social meaning of locality so they adopt the local [g] variant of the (Q) variable, while females adopt the variant which carries the social meaning of urbanity and softness, so they adopt the urban. Milroy and Milroy (1997:55) confirmed this tendency and stated that "males appear to favour more localised variants, which carry some kind of identity-based social meaning in the local community" and "females favour prestige norms" (Milroy 1987:55). Thus [q] is adopted or abandoned not for the phonetic shape it has rather for the social meaning it has. The social meaning of a given variant does not only vary with the change of the area but also with the speaker who uses it. The same linguistic form might have multisocial meanings. In this case, the social meaning sought is determined to a great extent by the speaker who uses it.

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