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## LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN THE DIALECT OF DAMASCUS: A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE

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### Abstract

This paper is a preliminary study of male and female discursive practices in Damascus Arabic, a very prestigious dialect in the Levant. It aims to detect gender differences and female trends in speech as the first step towards an in-depth analysis of the matter. The study is based on data gathered in the Syrian capital city between the years of 2007 and 2009. The results indicate that Damascene women show similar tendencies in the use of discursive strategies than women in other Arabic and non-Arabic societies. Among them are a significant use of intensifiers, interjections, and signals of uncertainty or politeness.

**Keywords:** Arabic dialectology, Damascus Arabic, discourse, gender

### LLENGUA I GÈNERE EN EL DIALECTE DE DAMASC: UNA ANÀLISI PRELIMINAR SOBRE EL DISCURS

#### Resum

Aquest article és un estudi preliminar sobre les pràctiques discursives masculines i femenines en l'àrab de Damasc, un dialecte molt prestigiós en l'àrea de llevant. Pretén detectar les diferències de gènere i les tendències femenines en la parla com un primer pas cap a una anàlisi aprofundida de la qüestió. L'estudi es basa en dades recollides a la capital siriana entre els anys 2007 i 2009. Els resultats indiquen que les dones de Damasc mostren una tendència a usar estratègies discursives similars a les dones d'altres societats àrabs i no àrabs, entre les quals destaquen un ús important d'intensificadors, interjeccions i signes d'incertesa o de cortesia.

**Paraules clau:** dialectologia àrab, àrab de Damasc, discurs, gènere

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## LENGUA Y GÉNERO EN EL DIALECTO DE DAMASCO: UN ANÁLISIS PRELIMINAR DEL DISCURSO

### Resumen

Este artículo presenta un estudio preliminar sobre las prácticas discursivas de hombres y mujeres en el árabe de Damasco, un dialecto muy prestigioso en el Levante. Tiene como objetivo detectar diferencias de género y tendencias femeninas en el habla, como un primer paso hacia un análisis profundo del tema. El estudio se basa en datos recopilados en la capital siria entre los años 2007 y 2009. Los resultados indican que las mujeres damascenas muestran tendencias similares en el empleo de estrategias discursivas a las de mujeres en otras sociedades árabes y no árabes, destacándose un uso significativo de intensificadores, interjecciones y marcas de incertidumbre o de cortesía.

**Palabras clave:** dialectología árabe, árabe de Damasco, discurso, género

### 1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, several sociolinguistic studies have been dedicated to language and gender, including those focused on the Arabic societies. These studies demonstrate that women's insecure position in the society is compensated for with a pronounced sensibility of linguistic norms and with the use of more prestigious speech patterns. In other words, women are more aware of their need of securing and signalling their social status, through language and other ways (Trudgill 1972: 182-183, Labov 1990: 210, Gordon 1997: 47-48). Among them, young, educated, and urban women seem to be more innovative than men of any age, and primarily responsible for new variations (Vicente 2009: 15).

Among the factors involved in language variation and change, gender is regarded as crucial; however, it interacts with other variables (Bassiouny 2009: 128, Sadiqi 1995: 64). Education seems to play an important role as well (Daher 1998: 198), since educated speakers appear to be leading linguistic changes, most often in the direction of urban and koineized regional standards (Al-Wer 1997: 259). Additionally, particularly in Arabic countries, education has been regarded as a good indicator of class, another factor involved in linguistic variation (Milroy & Gordon 2003: 99). In this sense, middle-class women produce linguistic forms closer to the standard language or more prestigious language than men (Trudgill 1972: 180). Finally, age is also involved in

linguistic choices (Walters 1991: 219), which in the Arab world seems to be directly related to the increase of women's literacy.<sup>1</sup>

Many linguistic studies have demonstrated that, in the Arab world (which is characterized by diglossia), the so-called Modern Standard Arabic (henceforth "MSA") is not the only standard and prestigious variety (cf. Ibrahim 1996: 119-122); on the contrary, at least in urban areas, there is a prestigious vernacular, which usually is the urban dialect of the big cities. The emergence of these varieties has been connected to urbanization, a phenomenon well established in old cities such as Cairo and Damascus (Bassiouney 2009: 135, 157).<sup>2</sup> These locally prestigious varieties are employed by women more than men (Hachimi 2001: 29) as a symbolic means of asserting their identity (Bassiouney 2009: 161).

In view of this, this paper is concerned with investigating some male and female linguistic practices and usage of the vernacular variety of Damascus, with a special focus on those features that the literature has related to each gender. It aims to detect gender differences and female trends in speech, as the first step towards a more in-depth analysis on the matter. My results are in line with most of previous studies on the matter in both Arabic and non-Arabic societies, showing patterns that may be considered universal.

The paper is structured as follows: first, it briefly reviews the bibliography on language and gender focused on Damascus Arabic; second, it offers some information about the methods used, including participants and data-gathering; third, it presents the results of the comparative analysis differentiating about female and male discursive strategies; finally, it shows the conclusions.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, in 1990 only 67% of Syrian women aged 15-24 were literate, while in 2004 the percentage increased to 90%. Even more, in 2004 Kuwait and Jordan showed a literacy percentage of 100% and 97%, respectively (cf. Bassiouney 2009: 135).

<sup>2</sup> During the past few decades, Damascus Arabic has gained significant prestige, and it is a variety that is understood by most inhabitants of the country. The media seems to be the main reason but not the only one (Procházka 2018: 289).

### 1.1 State of the art

Despite the prolific literature on Arabic as it relates to gender, relatively little has been done on the vernacular Arabic variety of the Syrian capital. Studies on sex differentiation in language in Damascus Arabic mainly focus on phonetics/phonology, as is the case for other varieties of Arabic and other languages (Ibrahim 1986: 116, Romaine 2003: 99). This is not surprising, because it is the aspect which shows the greater divergence, because, as Vicente (2009: 19) explains, the variation depending on gender in this field is more obvious.

Daher's studies (1997, 1998, 1999) on phonological variation of variables from MSA and vernacular Arabic demonstrate that men are more likely than women to use the MSA forms in their speech and that there is a linear correlation with the use of these forms and the speaker's level of education (to which men had more access at the time of his studies) and their age. Among his findings, the realization of *q* as *ʔ* is associated with urbanization and modernization—and therefore with women—while *q* is associated with men and rural speakers (Daher 1998: 189).

Alternatively, Kojak's master thesis (1983) is focused on the realization of interdentalals in the cities of Damascus and Hama, and the author concluded that men use more prestigious forms than females. However, she relates prestige only to standard forms, that is to say, to MSA and Classical Arabic, and not to the local prestigious varieties.

Furthermore, one of the variables studied by Ismail (2007) in two Damascene neighborhoods is *r*, which resulted in a change in progress. Despite the variable of age having the most significant effect on the change, she claims that young women clearly lead the change in one of the areas studied, and relates this change to their employment in the city.

Finally, Boucherit & Lentin (1989) provide us with an inventory of female features based on the literature published. Among them, several features of Damascus Arabic are pointed out, and they are not only related to phonetics and phonology, but also to lexicon or discursive strategies.

## 2. Methods

This study follows a qualitative approach, including discourse analysis and content analysis. The data was collected in the city of Damascus between 2007 and 2009 and consisting of about 3,5 hours of natural speech recordings. There were 19 participants, among them 8 men and 11 women. Each participant talked for around 10 minutes. At that time, I was living in the city for two years. I knew all the informants selected for this study before the recordings took place and many of them were my friends. Recordings of female informants mostly took place at my place or theirs, whereas male informants were mostly recorded in a room at Cervantes Institute.<sup>3</sup> All participants were asked to talk about any topic they wished except politics, and my participation was limited to answering their questions if there were any, or to ask them more questions about their topic if necessary.

All the informants were born in the Syrian capital, were native speakers of Damascus Arabic, and young—between the ages of 18 and 32. Regarding their level of education, 10 women and 5 men were studying at the university or had already graduated, whereas 3 men and 1 woman had finished secondary school or a professional training program.

	Male	Female
University graduate	4	3
University student	1	7
Professional training graduate	-	1
Secondary school graduate	3	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>11</b>

Table 1. Informants' education

The informants' profiles reflect the current equitable access to education for both genders, which before was mainly given to men. In the twenty-year period right before the Syrian political crisis, several reforms in higher education led to a significant

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<sup>3</sup> I kindly thank the two librarians at that time, Miguel and Hanne, for allowing me to use that space.

increase of youth university enrollment (Buckner & Saba 2010: 93), and female enrollment at universities reached its highest level ever.<sup>4</sup>

	Male	Female	Total
Upper Middle	2	4	6
Middle	3	7	10
Working	3	-	3

Table 2. Informants' social class

The informants' social classification is established according to their level of education, their occupation, and the neighborhood they lived in. As the next table shows, almost 84% of them belong to the middle or upper middle class of the society,<sup>5</sup> and only 16% to the working class, the latter being all men.

For this analysis, I selected recordings produced by men and women talking about the same topic. Every informant was recorded individually, except for one recording, in which a male and a female friend participated. The topics are related to religion, society, and culture, as the following table shows:

<b>Religion</b>	Ramadan Fest of the sacrifice Christians in Damascus
<b>Society</b>	Relationships among the youth Syrian weddings Experiences of a male/female Syrian in Spain The television in Syria Male/female conversation topics
<b>Culture</b>	The city of Damascus Damascus Arabic

Table 3. Topics

<sup>4</sup> For instance, in 2007 the number of female university students in the country was slightly lower than the number of male (W 138.304 - M 141.310), whereas in 2011 there were more female university students than male (W 180.920 - M 158.932). However, in the capital, the number of women has always been higher during this period of time (2007–2011) <<http://cbssyr.sy/yearbook/2012/Data-Chapter11/TAB-15-11-2012.pdf>>.

<sup>5</sup> This profile of informants is particularly interesting since, according to Trudgill (1972: 179), standard forms are introduced by middle-class women.

### 3. Results and discussion

The literature has identified a major—or in some cases even an almost exclusive—use of certain discursive strategies by men and others by women. This study points to some of these strategies observed in male and female Damascenes, based on the fact that the linguistic behavior of each not only differs in the production of linguistic features but also in their practices and use, which is related to different factors, such as the power and status of each group (Vicente 2009: 20).

In general terms, I observed that men's discourse is more assertive and characterized by explanations, facts, and general descriptions. Women's discourse is also informative, but includes plenty of personal details, by using as examples their own experiences or those related to their family and friends, expressed with a certain emotion. This is not restricted to Arabic, but observed in different societies.<sup>6</sup> For instance, among the suggestions pointed by Holmes (1998: 468, 472) concerning language universals, one finds that men focus on information, while women are more sensitive to the feelings rather than the content of their speech, and they show their emotions when speaking (cf. Sadiqi 1995: 70). Moreover, women's descriptions are much more detailed.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, men tend to express their own opinion and defend it with assertiveness, including making strong statements, which women avoid doing (cf. Lakoff 1973: 54, fn. 3). This inclination seems to be related to the greater status and power that men have in the society—and with the fact that they want to maintain and increase their power (cf. Bassiouney 2009: 133, 139). All these features are visible in the recordings, and I will give three detailed examples about the way men and women treated three different topics:

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<sup>6</sup> Brown's study of a Mayan community in Chiapas (Mexico) shows that women spend more time talking about feelings and attitudes toward events than men do (Brown 1980: 125).

<sup>7</sup> A more descriptive vocabulary for certain semantic fields is a feature associated with women (Vicente 2009: 8).

(1) One man and two women decided to talk about Ramadan. The man explained the meaning of the sacred month and described the rituals and the importance of the family meetings. The two women also talked about these questions, yet they also addressed other aspects, like the typical meals cooked during that time, as well as other customs, such as watching a television series after the breakfast (*ʔiftār*). One of the two women also talked about more personal issues, like how she physically feels during that time and which specific rituals she performs.

(2) One Christian man and woman both talked about the Christian community in Damascus. The man explained the different existing doctrines (Catholic, Protestant, etc.) and addressed some social issues—for example, the real number of Christians in the country, which, according to him, was higher than what was estimated by the official statistics. He also believed that Christians have a higher social status than Muslims, which he attributed to their higher level of education. The Christian woman, on the other hand, talked about her particular case—of a Christian woman living in a country where Islam is the majority religion, explaining how she felt and how she behaved. She also cited some personal examples of hers and her family's way of life.

(3) Finally, one man and two women talked about Syrian weddings. The man described and supported the traditional way in which the groom's family looks for a future wife for him. He also explained why it is socially preferable that the woman is (much) younger than the man. Afterwards, he explained the steps of the man's part of the wedding, including the signing of the marriage contract, and then explained why the groom joins the woman's part of the wedding at the end of it.<sup>8</sup> One of the two women, however, described the nature of the wedding for both the man and woman in detail. She also gave many examples about the wedding presents, the reception, and the guests' clothing. Also, she described the bride's feelings during the weddings. The second woman briefly described both the engagement and the wedding. She did, however, give real examples of her friends' weddings and said where she would like to travel on her honeymoon.

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<sup>8</sup> Traditional weddings in Damascus are divided by gender.



### 3.1 Features of female discourse

This section enumerates some linguistic features which characterize the speech of my female informants—among them, a more frequent use of intensifiers, signs denoting hesitation or politeness, and interjections.

#### 3.1.1 Intensifiers

Female discourse shows an extensive use of intensifiers, which are used to emphasize or reaffirm meaning; and, according to Chetrit (1986: 59), they are one of the features which clearly distinguish female discourse from masculine. Among them, my data contain repetitions, oaths, and the use of the term *ʕan ʒadd* “really.”

*Repetitions* intensify the meaning of a word (Abu-Haidar 1991: 34), and the data includes two kinds: (a) Repetition of the same lexical item two or three times (occasionally even more), particularly the term *ktīr* “much, many, a lot”;<sup>9</sup> and (b) repetition of a phrase. Sometimes the repeated phrase shows a reversal of the elements (see example 6). Examples:

(1) *halla? la-shūr ḥalu ktīr ʔktīr ʔktīr ʔktīr bi-ramaḍān* “The pre-dawn meal in Ramadan is very very very very nice” (or: “so nice”).

(2) *ma bḥabba mnōb ʔmnōb* “I don’t like her at all, at all.”

(3) *bižannen əl-bēt, bižannen* “The house is amazing [lit. ‘makes crazy’], it is amazing.”

It is worth noting that, in the data, the repetition of the negative particle *la* is used as a device for a strong negation. For example:

(4) *la, la, la, la, la, ma fi mašākel ʔabadan* “Absolutely not, there are no problems at all”, replying to the question “Is there any problem if the girl walks alone in the street?”

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<sup>9</sup> *Ktīr* is an intensive equivalent to “so” in English, which Lakoff (1973: 53-54, fn. 3) believes to be more characteristic to women’s language than men’s.

However, this has been found among both genders and only further research would determine whether it can be considered a female feature.

Regarding *oaths*, their significant use by women has been documented in other varieties of Arabic, such as Moroccan and Tunisian Arabic (Trabelsi 1991: 95; Chetrit, 1986: 62). According to Hachimi (2001: 45), women use oaths to support and validate their statements by invoking the power of God, because of their secondary position in society. The term *walla* “by God!”<sup>10</sup> and its variants are by far the most used in the data. Examples:

(5) *ma kan<sup>ət</sup> baḡrafek, law baḡrafek kant ḡazamtek walla* “I didn’t know you. If I had known you, I would have invited you, by God!”

(6) *al-waḡt tḡaxxar, walla tḡaxxar al-waḡt* “It is late, by God! It is late”.

Moreover, this example shows a repetition of the same phrase, in which the order of the elements is reversed.

This oath is sometimes repeated, and therefore its meaning is heavily emphasized. Example:

(7) *ḡana wallāhi wallāhi ḡabbēto la-ḡam<sup>ər</sup>* “I—by God! by God!—liked ḡAm<sup>ər</sup>.”

Another way to reaffirm the meaning is the use of the term *ḡan žadd* “really,” commonly found in women’s speech, and—at the same time—stressing the speaker’s sincerity.<sup>11</sup> Example:

(8) *aš-šām al-ḡadīme ḡan žadd ma fi maṡla baḡ-ḡālam* “Old Damascus, really, there is nothing else like it in the world.”

<sup>10</sup> In the course of this paper, and in order to show the accurate meaning of the term in Arabic, I will stick to its literal translation. However, I am aware that, in many cases, a different translation would be more appropriate, like “really” or “seriously.”

<sup>11</sup> The equivalent particle (*melel*) is found in Mayan females as a rhetorical assurance of sincerity. However, the same particle abounds in male public speaking or the speech of any male who belongs to the same community, with the aim of political persuasion (cf. Brown 1980: 120, 128).

It is not rare to find the combination of these intensifiers, as a means of heavily emphasizing the discourse. Examples:

(9) *ramaḍān ʔanno ʃaḥḥa ʃan ʒadd waʃla* “Ramadan is healthy, really, by God!”

(10) *ʃan ʒadd ʔanno waʃlāhi ʔana bḥabb kəll əl-ʃālam, kəll əl-ʃālam ʔbḥabba* “Really, I mean, by God!, I like all the people, I like all the people.”

The second sentence, which is a repetition of the first, shows a reversal of the elements, as in example 6.

### 3.1.2 Signs denoting hesitation or politeness

The data show different signs of hesitation or uncertainty, particularly recurrent in women’s discourse, which may reflect women’s marginality and powerlessness (cf. Lakoff 1973: 45, 50). These signs show the seeking of approval from participants in conversation, because of women’s feelings of social insecurity and lack of assertiveness (Sadiqi 1995: 72). Also, women value solidarity and tend to use linguistic devices that stress it; hence they are more concerned for their partner’s positive face needs (Bassiouney 2009: 132). For this reason, they might also be considered as markers of politeness in some contexts.

a) Hedges such as *məmken* “maybe,” *bižūz*, “maybe,” or *ma baʃref* “I don’t know,” the later in different combinations. Examples:

(11) *kəll wāḥed bisāfer, bižarreb ... mumken ... ma byaʃref əl-wāḥed* “Everyone travels, tries ... maybe ... one doesn’t know”.

(12) *ma baʃref ʃu ... mumken ʔəḥki ʔaktar mən hək ʃan əš-ʃabāb əs-sūriyyīn* “I don’t know what ... I could talk more than this about young Syrians”.

(13) *bižūz bāb ʔzǧīr huwwe wāḥed mən hadōl lə-bwāb* “Maybe *Bāb ʔzǧīr* is one of these gates”.

b) *Questions* expressing doubt and hesitation for continuing the discourse, such as *šlōn baddi ʔallek?* “How can I tell you?” or *šu kamān?* “What else?”. Examples:

(14) *bass hayy ʔrfiʔti ... šlōn baddi ʔal-lek? wa!lla ʔanno ʕan ʒadd ʔanno hiyye ktīr ʕam-taʕsab* “But this friend of mine ... how can I tell you? By God! I mean, really, she is playing a lot”.<sup>12</sup>

(15) *ʔe, šu kamān? ... hayy ramaḍān* “Yes, what else? ... This is Ramadan”.

c) *Questions* following a statement which seek for a confirmation, such as *māšī?* “OK?”; *tamām?* “Right?”. Examples:

(16) *huwwe bikūn ʔabʔn ʔaxuwwa la-mart xāli, māšī?* “He is my uncle’s wife’s nephew, OK?”

(17) *baʕdēn bifūt al-ʕarīs, ʔaw mumken yfūtu sawa, tamām?* “Afterwards, the groom enters (the room), or maybe they enter together, right?”

d) *Echo questions*, which usually are rhetorical questions that repeat part or all of what has been asked by another person (Abu-Haidar 1991: 34). In my data one woman makes a systematic use of this strategy to confirm that she understood the question. Examples:

(18) *-kiʕ al-ḥafle?* “How is the party?”  
*-kiʕ al-ḥafle? mnīḥa.* “How is the party? Good.”

(19) *-šu huwwe l-barnāmež la-mfaḍḍal la-ʔalek?* “What is your favorite TV-show?”  
*-la-mfaḍḍal la-ʔali? barnāmež Oprah* “What is my favorite tv-show? Oprah's show.”

e) *Tag questions* and other *negative questions*, which presuppose an affirmative reply. They are less assertive than a yes/no question, and, in some contexts, they are signs of uncertainty (cf. Bassiouney 2009: 133) which look for the addressee’s

<sup>12</sup> This sentence includes different intensifiers, apropos to the previous section.

confirmation.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, both are regarded polite statements, which do not impose agreement on the addressee and therefore protect his or her face (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987: 122). Examples:

(20) *mu hannen biḥaṭṭu ḥiżāb?* “Don’t they wear the hijab?”

(21) *Ṣam tafhami Ṣaliyyi, mu?* “You are understanding me, don’t you?”

### 3.1.3 Interjections

Women’s speech has been characterized by the use of interjections, some of which are only employed by women (Boucherit & Lentin 1989: 26, Rosenhouse 1998: 140, Sadiqi 1995: 70). Moreover, the exclusive use of certain interjections by women is not restricted to the Arab world, since it has been observed in different communities, such among the Gros Ventres of the Fort Belknap Reservation in Montana (U.S.A.) (Flannery 1946: 133), or in different South American languages (Rose 2015: 514).

In the data, which include a very limited number of informants, only women made use of interjections, which does not mean that men do not use them. All the interjections are expressive and, according to Ameka (1992: 113), are symptoms of the speaker’s mental state.<sup>14</sup> Examples:

(22) *ya ʔa//a!* (expressing shame)

(23) *ʔō* (expressing surprise)

(24) *ya ḥarām!* (expressing aversion)

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<sup>13</sup> According to Lakoff (1973: 54), one makes a statement when one has confidence in one’s knowledge and is pretty certain that the statement will be believed.

<sup>14</sup> For a classification of the interjections based on specific communicative functions, see Ameka (1992: 113-114).

### 3.2 Features of male discourse

On the other hand, my data show some features preferred by men—among them, terms denoting security and terms related to sexuality.

#### 3.2.1. Signs denoting security

The use of terms denoting security by men makes their discourse more assertive than females'. This strategy is connected to the greater power and status of men in most cultures, mentioned above. Hence, men are allowed to use more power-related techniques than women, while the same behavior from a woman could be considered face-threatening (Bassiouney 2009: 139). On the contrary, women tend to use more polite forms and euphemisms (Sadiqi 1995: 72).

Some of the terms used to assert male discourse in my data are: *ʔəžžom* "I affirm," *mətʔakked* "convinced, sure," *ʔakīd* "certain, sure," *nihāʔiyyan* "absolutely."

Examples:

(25) *ʔana bəʔder ʔəžžom ʔanno ma fi ʔayy ʔəzʕāžāt* "I can affirm that there is no disturbance."

(26) *fa-bətxayyal, mu bətxayyal, šəbʔh mətʔakked ʔanno l-masīhiyyīn bi-sūrya hānnen ʕam-yʕīšū ʔafdal hayāt* "Therefore, I imagine—not 'imagine'—I am almost sure that Christians in Syria are living the best life".

(27) *ma byənhaka fiyya nihāʔiyyan* "It is absolutely not spoken".

(28) *ʔakīd, ʔana mətʔakked mən haš-ši* "Sure, I am sure of this thing".

#### 3.2.2 Terms carrying sexual connotations

First, some men used terms explicitly denoting parts of the women's body that carry sexual connotations, such as *šəqʔr* "breast" or *baṭṭāriyye* "battery" (a metaphor denoting a woman's bottom). Examples:

(29) *hayy hāmle baṭṭāriyye* “This one (f.) carries a battery,” meaning that she has a nice bottom.

(30) *šəftu hayy? ʕāmle ʕamaliyyet tažmīl nāfxa ʕaḍra* “Did you see this one (f.)? She got plastic surgery, she augmented (lit. inflated) her breast”.

Second, men described some actions performed by women towards them that implicitly have sexual connotations, such as “to kiss” or “to gaze.” Example:

(31) *hayy əl-yōm bāsətni w hayy əl-yōm ġamzətni* “This one (f.) today kissed me, and this one (f.) today winked at me”.

In this regard, it must be pointed out that women, despite dedicating more time to talk about men they have had a relationship with (and giving more details), they never used any term which could be related to sexuality.

Finally, the word “sex” was used by two men and one woman. Both men used the term in Spanish (*sexo*), but one of them used the term in Arabic (*ʕəns*) two times afterwards in the same recording, perhaps because he relaxed and felt more comfortable as the recording went on. However, he used it in the phrase *hacer el sexo\** (Sp.), intending it to mean “to have sex” (yet mistakenly formed in Spanish).<sup>15</sup> Perhaps the fact of talking to a person of the opposite gender precipitated the euphemistic use of the term in a foreign language. By doing so, the speaker’s perception of the meaning of the term is softer.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> In Spanish the correct phrase is *tener sexo*. The mistake must be due to a literal translation from Arabic *byəʕmel sēks* “(lit.) to make sex.”

<sup>16</sup> The use of foreign words has been detected in word fields where euphemisms are frequent, as in the subject of “menstruation” (Ritt-Benmimoun & Procházka 2009: 54). In this regard, Trabelsi (1991: 92) noticed that, in Tunis, women employ a direct sexual language except in front of a male addressee or someone to whom they owe respect. In those cases, they use euphemisms; among them, young women make use of French borrowings, a strategy not used by any man. Additionally, in Algeria, women recall the difficulty of using their mother tongue and classical Arabic for saying certain loving expressions like *n-habek* “I love you” or for talking about sexuality. They use French in these cases (Morsly 1998: 87, 92-93). Unfortunately, my data show only a few instances of this kind. Definitely, more data is needed to further study this matter.

Society's expectations of women's language do not allow obscenity or vulgarity (Moïse *et al.* 2020: 20), since women are related to the social and *gentle* aspects of life (Abdel-Jawad 1983: 116). Moreover, Gordon (1997: 50) suggests that if women consider that they might be judged by people who do not know them, they would choose a more prestigious way to express themselves, avoiding, among others, potential sexual immorality. Furthermore, it is well known that sex is a taboo topic in Arabic societies, and that the context in which a conversation takes place, as well as the interlocutor's identity and sex, may influence the occurrence of this topic (Rosenhouse 1998: 141-142). It seems that my female informants avoided talking about it, perhaps due to the presence of a recorder or by the fact that they were participating in academic research. The only woman who used the term "sex" (in Spanish, however) was a very close friend of mine, a condition that I believe made her relaxed enough to do it.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

The main conclusion coming from this research is that women in Damascus Arabic show similar trends in discourse with women in other varieties of Arabic. Moreover, some of these trends are extended to women belonging to non-Arabic societies. These findings are not surprising, since, as demonstrated in this paper, the features presented seem to be connected to women's secondary position in the society: women feel unconfident— women feel unconfident sometimes and use different strategies aimed to reaffirm or intensify their speech. Moreover, my female informants frequently combined different discursive strategies, strongly reinforcing their intentions. Furthermore, women's perception of being socially inferior to men leads them to try to gain prestige through their speech; and this is why they are linguistically more supportive, polite, and correct and avoid the use of terms that

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<sup>17</sup> The same behavior is observed in an informant—and friend—recorded in 2020, who was living in Spain for 5 years. She used the term "sex" in English, although she is proficient in Spanish, and the next two times in Arabic.



might be considered vulgar. On the contrary, men have power and a secure position, therefore they feel confident in being firmer and more assertive in their discourse. They are also allowed to talk about sexuality in one way or another, because they will not be judged by doing that.

Additionally, this paper has shown that female discourse is more expressive than male; hence, among other ways, they use more interjections than men as a means of showing their emotions. Along the same lines, their discourse is more intimate, and tends to contain plenty of details, including personal ones.

The fact that my informants were all young at the time of the data collection—the majority in their twenties—and that most of them had a high level of education, indicates that differences in speech by gender remain significant despite several social changes in the Syrian capital.

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