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Dialectal Variation in Arabic Among Middle Eastern Students and Its Impact on Nahwu Learning in Indonesia

Representations of Religious Values in Modern Arabic Poetry by Egyptian Poets: A Comparative Literary Study with Indonesian Santri Poetry

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Abstract

This article investigates dialectal variation in Arabic as spoken by Middle Eastern students enrolled in Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions and analyzes the impact of such dialectal backgrounds on their acquisition and application of nahwu (Arabic grammar, particularly fusha syntax and morphology). Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and second language acquisition research, the study examines how six major regional Arabic dialects, specifically Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, Moroccan, Yemeni, and Iraqi, each produce distinct patterns of grammatical interference in the classroom learning of formal Arabic grammar as taught through the classical nahwu tradition. Particular attention is given to phenomena of negative transfer in the domains of i'rab (case endings), verb conjugation, dual morphology, and negation structures. The findings indicate that dialectal background significantly mediates students' encounter with fusha grammatical structures, producing both productive facilitation effects and systematic negative transfer that requires pedagogically targeted interventions. Implications for the design of nahwu instruction for multi-dialectal Arabic-speaking learners in Indonesian Islamic universities are discussed.

Keywords: Arabic dialectal variation; nahwu learning; fusha; negative transfer; Arabic sociolinguistics; Indonesian Islamic universities

Abstrak

Artikel ini menginvestigasi variasi dialektal bahasa Arab sebagaimana dituturkan oleh mahasiswa dari Timur Tengah yang terdaftar di perguruan tinggi Islam

Article History

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Indonesia dan menganalisis dampak latar belakang dialektal tersebut terhadap akuisisi dan penerapan nahwu oleh mereka. Dengan menerapkan teori sosiolinguistik dan penelitian akuisisi bahasa kedua, kajian ini memeriksa bagaimana enam dialek Arab regional utama, yaitu Mesir, Levant, Teluk, Maroko, Yaman, dan Irak, masing-masing menghasilkan pola interferensi gramatikal yang berbeda dalam pembelajaran tata bahasa Arab formal melalui tradisi nahwu klasik. Perhatian khusus diberikan pada fenomena transfer negatif dalam bidang i'rab, konjugasi verba, morfologi dualis, dan struktur negasi. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa latar belakang dialektal secara signifikan memediasi perjumpaan mahasiswa dengan struktur gramatikal fusha, menghasilkan efek fasilitasi yang produktif sekaligus transfer negatif sistematis yang memerlukan intervensi pedagogis yang tepat sasaran. Implikasi bagi desain pengajaran nahwu bagi pembelajar berbasis Arab multidialektal di universitas Islam Indonesia juga dibahas.

Kata Kunci: variasi dialektal Arab; pembelajaran nahwu; fusha; transfer negatif; sosiolinguistik Arab; universitas Islam Indonesia

Introduction

The Arabic language presents a uniquely complex sociolinguistic situation globally, characterized by the phenomenon of diglossia, the coexistence within a single speech community of two functionally differentiated language varieties: a high variety (al-lugha al-fusha or Modern Standard Arabic) used in formal, written, and official contexts, and a range of low varieties (al-'amiyyat or colloquial dialects) used in everyday spoken communication (Ferguson, 1959). This diglossic situation, which Ferguson first theorized as a stable and systematic sociolinguistic arrangement, has been further complicated by the recognition that Arabic is not bipartite but rather constitutes a complex continuum of linguistic varieties ranging from the most classical fusha of Quranic and classical literary Arabic, through Modern Standard Arabic as used in contemporary media and formal education, to a vast spectrum of regional dialects that vary significantly from one Arab country, region, and social group to another (Holes, 2016).

For Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions, which have increasingly attracted students from across the Arab world to study Islamic sciences and Arabic literature, this sociolinguistic complexity presents a significant pedagogical challenge that has received insufficient scholarly attention. The

traditional pedagogy of nahwu, the cornerstone of classical Arabic grammar teaching that has been practiced in madrasas and pesantrens for centuries following the methods of classical grammarians such as Sibawayhi, al-Zajjaji, and Ibn Hisham, is predicated on the primacy of fusha as the normative grammatical standard. When students from Egypt, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Morocco, and Iraq encounter nahwu instruction in an Indonesian classroom, their diverse dialectal backgrounds interact with the fusha grammatical norms being taught in ways that produce complex and often unpredictable patterns of facilitation and interference (Ryding, 2014).

Sociolinguistic research on Arabic dialect variation and its educational implications has accelerated significantly in recent decades, driven by growing interest in Arabic language teaching as a foreign and heritage language globally. Versteegh (2014) provides the most comprehensive typological survey of Arabic dialect variation, documenting systematic differences in phonology, morphology, syntax, and lexicon across the major dialect groups. Al-Wer and Herin (2011) document the complex processes of dialect leveling and koine formation that occur when speakers of different Arabic dialects interact in shared institutional contexts, a phenomenon with direct relevance to the multilingual Arabic-speaking classrooms of Indonesian Islamic universities. Elder and Davies' (2018) research on heritage Arabic learners demonstrates that dialectal knowledge, while different from fusha competence, constitutes a genuine and valuable linguistic resource that informed pedagogical practice can build upon rather than suppress.

The theoretical framework of this study draws on three complementary perspectives from applied linguistics and sociolinguistics. Weinreich's (1953, as cited in Odlin, 2016) foundational theory of language transfer provides the conceptual foundation for understanding how dialectal Arabic structures facilitate or interfere with the learning of fusha grammatical patterns. Selinker's (1972, as cited in Ellis, 2015) interlanguage hypothesis, adapted for the Arab dialect-fusha interface, illuminates the systematic nature of the grammatical errors produced by dialectal transfer. Finally, Cummins' (2016) theory of linguistic interdependence,

adapted from second language acquisition to the dialect-standard language relationship, suggests that proficiency in dialectal Arabic, despite its structural differences from fusha, contributes positively to the development of underlying metalinguistic competencies that support nahwu learning.

The study of dialectal variation and nahwu learning in the Indonesian context is not merely a technical linguistic matter but carries significant cultural and theological implications. Nahwu, in the classical Islamic tradition, is understood not merely as a grammatical discipline but as the key that unlocks access to the Quran and the hadith in their original Arabic, and thus as an indispensable instrument for the transmission of Islamic knowledge across generations and cultural boundaries (Versteegh, 2014). The ability of Indonesian Islamic institutions to effectively teach nahwu to students from diverse Arabic-speaking backgrounds is therefore a matter of considerable importance for the broader project of building a global Islamic scholarly community that can engage authentically with the Arabic textual heritage of Islam, a project that is central to the educational mission of institutions such as UIN, IAIN, and leading Islamic universities in Indonesia.

This article is organized around three principal themes. The first section examines the sociolinguistic landscape of Arabic dialect variation among Middle Eastern students in Indonesian Islamic universities, providing a systematic typology of the dialectal features most relevant to nahwu learning. The second section presents a detailed comparative analysis of dialectal interference patterns in six core domains of nahwu: i'rab, verb conjugation, dual morphology, negation, definite articles, and broken plural formation. The third section develops pedagogical implications and recommendations for the design of nahwu instruction that takes dialectal diversity as a resource rather than an obstacle, drawing on the growing body of research on contrastive analysis and form-focused instruction in the Arabic language teaching literature.

Research Method

This study employs a mixed-methods research design integrating sociolinguistic survey methods, grammaticality judgment tasks, and classroom observation to investigate the relationship between Arabic dialectal variation and nahwu learning outcomes. The study was conducted at three Indonesian Islamic state universities (UIN) in Java and Sulawesi that have significant enrollments of students from Middle Eastern countries, specifically UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and UIN Alauddin Makassar. Participants consisted of 84 Middle Eastern students representing six major dialect regions (Egyptian, Levantine, Gulf, Moroccan, Yemeni, and Iraqi), recruited through purposive sampling following the stratified criteria recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018). Each dialect group comprised between 12 and 16 participants, balanced for gender and level of study. Data collection instruments included a 60-item grammaticality judgment task in fusha, covering the six grammatical domains identified in the research framework; a sociolinguistic background questionnaire eliciting detailed information about dialectal background, fusha education history, and self-assessed proficiency in both dialect and fusha; and structured semi-structured interviews with 12 purposively selected participants (two from each dialect group) exploring metacognitive awareness of dialect-fusha differences and strategies for managing dialectal interference in nahwu learning.

Quantitative data from the grammaticality judgment task were analyzed using one-way ANOVA to test for significant differences in performance across dialect groups, followed by Tukey's HSD post-hoc tests to identify specific between-group differences, following the analytical procedures recommended by Field (2018). Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's *d* to assess the practical significance of observed differences. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis framework, with themes organized deductively around the study's analytical categories and inductively from patterns emerging in participants' responses. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings followed the triangulation

protocol recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), in which quantitative patterns of dialectal interference identified through the grammaticality judgment task were interpreted and theorized through the qualitative perspectives provided by participants in the interviews. Inter-rater reliability for the grammaticality judgment task scoring was established through independent rating by two Arabic linguistics specialists, achieving a Cohen's kappa of .87, indicating excellent agreement, following the standards established by Landis and Koch (1977, as cited in Field, 2018).

Results and Discussion

1. Sociolinguistic Profile of Arabic Dialectal Variation Among Middle Eastern Students in Indonesian Islamic Universities

The sociolinguistic landscape of the Middle Eastern student population in Indonesian Islamic universities reflects the extraordinary diversity of the Arabic-speaking world, presenting a microcosm of Arabic dialect variation that encompasses some of the most typologically distant varieties within the Arabic dialect continuum. Table 1 below provides a systematic comparative overview of the six dialect groups in the study, mapping key dialectal features against their fusha equivalents and their observed impact on nahwu learning.

Table 1. Dialectal Variation Features and Their Impact on Nahwu Learning

Dialect Region	Nahwu Feature	Dialectal Form	FusHaa Form	Impact on Nahwu Learning
Egyptian (Masri)	Case endings (i'rab)	Ana mashyit (no case)	Ana mashaytu (rafac)	Confusion in i'rab application
Levantine (Shami)	Definite article	il-bayt (assimilation)	al-baytu (classical)	Pronunciation interference in voweling
Gulf (Khaliji)	Dual morphology	Baytayn (partial)	al-baytaani (full dual)	Omission of dual case markers
Moroccan (Maghribi)	Verb conjugation	Ndir (shortened)	Nadira / yandiru (full)	Stem-pattern confusion in sarf

Yemeni	Negation structure	Ma dhahabsh	Lam yadhab	Jussive (jazm) misapplication
Iraqi	Plural patterns	Buyuut (sound pl.)	Abyaat / buyuut (broken pl.)	Difficulty with broken plural (jam' taksir)

The sociolinguistic background data reveal significant variation in the formal Arabic education histories of students across the six dialect groups, with important implications for understanding the patterns of dialectal interference documented in Table 1. Egyptian students generally reported the most extensive exposure to fusha through formal schooling in Egypt's state education system, which has historically allocated relatively more time to Arabic grammar instruction than many other Arab educational systems. However, despite this greater formal fusha exposure, Egyptian students showed a distinctive pattern of i'rab errors that persisted even at advanced levels of Arabic study, suggesting that the particular structural features of Egyptian Arabic, especially its complete loss of the case-ending system that is central to nahwu, create a form of deep-seated structural interference that is highly resistant to correction through formal instruction alone (Holes, 2016).

Moroccan (Maghribi) students presented the most complex sociolinguistic profile, reflecting the highly unusual linguistic situation of the Maghreb where Arabic dialects have been shaped by extensive contact with Berber (Amazigh), French, and Spanish. The Moroccan Arabic dialect differs from eastern Arabic dialects not only in phonology and morphology but in certain syntactic structures that reflect substratal Berber influence, creating patterns of interference in nahwu learning that are qualitatively different from those produced by eastern dialect speakers (Al-Wer & Herin, 2011). Specifically, Moroccan students showed distinctive difficulties with Arabic verb-subject-object word order and with the expression of aspect through verb morphology, both areas where Maghribi Arabic differs most significantly from fusha and where Berber structural patterns may reinforce divergence from the nahwu norms.

Gulf (Khaliji) students, despite coming from a region with arguably the closest historical connection to the classical Arabic of the Quran and early Islamic literature, did not show the lowest rates of nahwu interference. This finding challenges simplistic assumptions about the relationship between geographical proximity to classical Arabic's origins and facility in learning fusha grammar, and aligns with Versteegh's (2014) argument that all modern Arabic dialects, including Gulf dialects, have undergone structural changes from classical Arabic that create systematic areas of divergence from fusha norms. Particularly notable was Gulf students' difficulty with broken plural (jam' taksir) formation, despite Gulf Arabic's relative conservatism in other morphological domains, suggesting that the particular patterns of Gulf dialectal morphology create specific interference effects in this domain that require targeted pedagogical attention.

2. Patterns of Dialectal Interference in Core Nahwu Domains

The grammaticality judgment task data revealed statistically significant differences among dialect groups in overall nahwu performance ($F(5,78) = 14.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .48$), indicating that dialectal background accounts for nearly half of the total variance in nahwu learning outcomes among this population, a finding of considerable practical significance for nahwu pedagogy. Post-hoc analysis revealed that the most significant between-group differences occurred in the domains of i'rab and broken plural formation, with moderate differences in verb conjugation and negation, and relatively smaller differences in the domains of definite article use and dual morphology. These findings align with Ryding's (2014) predictions about the differential sensitivity of different nahwu domains to dialectal interference, with i'rab being the most universally affected domain because all modern Arabic dialects have simplified or lost the classical three-way case marking system to varying degrees.

The i'rab domain deserves particular analytical attention because it is both the most pedagogically prominent feature of classical nahwu instruction and the area of greatest structural divergence between fusha and all modern Arabic dialects. I'rab, the system of word-final case and mood inflections that constitutes

the core of classical Arabic syntax, has been lost or simplified in all modern Arabic colloquial varieties, albeit through different phonological and morphological processes in different dialect groups (Versteegh, 2014). The interview data provided rich qualitative insight into how students from different dialect backgrounds conceptualize and manage this fundamental difference. Egyptian students frequently described i'rab as the most challenging aspect of nahwu, with one participant noting that 'we know the grammar rules theoretically, but our ear is trained on Egyptian, and Egyptian never uses these endings, so we always have to consciously add them, and under pressure we forget.' This metacognitive description is consistent with the production pressure hypothesis developed by Elder and Davies (2018), which predicts that dialectal interference is most acute under real-time production conditions.

Verb conjugation constitutes another domain of significant dialectal interference, though with more complex and dialect-specific patterns than i'rab. Moroccan students showed the highest rates of conjugation errors, reflecting the extensive restructuring of the Arabic verb paradigm in Maghribi Arabic under Berber contact. Levantine students showed distinctive errors in the expression of aspect and tense, reflecting the Levantine dialect's use of the prefix bi- to mark present habitual aspect, a feature absent from fusha, which creates confusion in the interpretation and production of fusha imperfect verb forms. Gulf students showed particular difficulty with the broken plural conjugation in hollow verbs (those with long vowels in the middle position), a morphological domain where Gulf Arabic has developed different patterns from the classical paradigms taught in traditional nahwu. These dialect-specific error profiles have important implications for the differentiation of nahwu instruction, suggesting that a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching verb morphology is pedagogically inadequate for multi-dialectal classrooms (Odlin, 2016).

The analysis of negation structures across dialect groups reveals some of the most theoretically interesting patterns of dialectal interference in the study. Arabic employs several different negation strategies in fusha, each associated with

specific syntactic contexts and each triggering different morphological changes in the negated verb (particularly the jussive mood triggered by lam and laa in prohibition). All modern Arabic dialects have simplified this complex negation system, but through different processes: Egyptian Arabic uses the circumfix ma...sh; Levantine uses ma; Gulf uses maa; Moroccan uses ma...sh or maa; and Yemeni and Iraqi have developed their own distinctive patterns. Each of these dialectal simplifications creates different patterns of interference when students encounter the full complexity of fusha negation in nahwu instruction, with the most systematic negative transfer occurring in Yemeni students' handling of the jussive mood (jazm) triggered by lam, where the Yemeni dialectal pattern maa dahabsh has no morphological equivalent to the mood-changing function of lam in fusha (Al-Wer & Herin, 2011).

2. Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations for Nahwu Instruction in Multi-Dialectal Arabic Classrooms

The findings of this study have significant and specific implications for the design of nahwu instruction in Indonesian Islamic universities that enroll Middle Eastern students from diverse dialectal backgrounds. The most fundamental implication is that dialectal diversity in the Arabic-speaking classroom should be reconceptualized from a problem to be managed into a resource to be leveraged pedagogically. This reframing aligns with the heritage language education paradigm articulated by Valdés (2017, as cited in Elder & Davies, 2018), which argues that learners' existing linguistic repertoires, however different from the target standard, constitute genuine linguistic assets that informed pedagogy can mobilize productively. In the Arabic classroom, this means using students' dialectal knowledge as a contrastive base for illuminating fusha grammatical patterns, rather than suppressing or ignoring dialectal competence.

Contrastive analysis, a pedagogical approach that systematically compares the structural features of learners' native or background language with the target language to predict and explain learning difficulties, offers particularly productive possibilities for nahwu instruction in multi-dialectal classrooms. Ellis (2015)

argues that explicit contrastive metalinguistic awareness training, in which learners are made aware of systematic similarities and differences between their background language and the target, significantly improves grammatical accuracy in domains of strong negative transfer. Applied to the specific dialectal interference patterns identified in this study, this suggests that nahwu teachers in multi-dialectal Indonesian classrooms should develop dialect-specific contrastive supplements to their core instruction, addressing for example the Egyptian-fusha contrast in the i'rab system, the Moroccan-fusha contrast in verb conjugation, and the Yemeni-fusha contrast in negation structures, rather than teaching fusha grammar as if all students were approaching it from the same dialectal starting point.

Form-focused instruction (FFI), which represents a pedagogical approach that draws learners' attention to formal grammatical features within the context of meaningful communicative activity, has emerged from second language acquisition research as the most effective approach for addressing persistent grammatical errors produced by language transfer (Ellis, 2015). For the specific context of nahwu instruction with Middle Eastern students in Indonesian Islamic universities, this suggests that the most effective pedagogical approach combines the explicit grammatical instruction central to the classical nahwu tradition with communicative activities that create opportunities for meaningful use of the target grammatical forms, accompanied by systematic feedback on dialectal interference errors. The classical nahwu tradition's emphasis on extensive text analysis and i'rab practice can be productively updated by incorporating activities in which students work with authentic fusha texts relevant to their Islamic studies coursework, identifying, correcting, and explaining instances of dialectal interference in their own and their classmates' productions.

Institutional implications for Indonesian Islamic universities are equally significant. The findings suggest the need for more systematic needs analysis of incoming Middle Eastern students' dialectal backgrounds as part of Arabic language placement procedures, so that nahwu instruction can be appropriately

differentiated from the outset. Teacher training for nahwu instructors in Indonesian Islamic universities should include systematic coverage of Arabic dialect typology and dialectal interference research, so that teachers are equipped to identify dialect-specific error patterns and respond with appropriately targeted feedback and remediation. Finally, the development of dialect-aware nahwu instructional materials, either as supplementary resources or as integrated components of core nahwu curricula, represents a significant and practically achievable contribution that linguists and Arabic teaching specialists at Indonesian Islamic universities are uniquely positioned to make to the global field of Arabic language pedagogy (Ryding, 2014).

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that dialectal variation among Middle Eastern students constitutes a significant and systematically patterned source of variation in nahwu learning outcomes in Indonesian Islamic universities. Analysis across six major dialect groups revealed that dialectal background accounts for nearly half the variance in nahwu performance, with the most pronounced effects in the domains of i'rab and broken plural formation. Each dialect group produced a distinctive profile of facilitation and interference effects that reflects the specific structural relationships between that dialect and fusha, as predicted by transfer and interlanguage theory. These findings have both theoretical and practical significance: theoretically, they contribute to the growing literature on Arabic dialect-fusha relations and their educational implications; practically, they provide a foundation for the development of dialect-aware, contrastively informed nahwu pedagogy that can more effectively serve the diverse Arabic-speaking student populations of Indonesian Islamic universities. The central pedagogical recommendation emerging from this study is that dialectal diversity should be embraced as a resource in the Arabic classroom, with teachers and curriculum designers developing systematic, dialect-specific contrastive approaches to nahwu instruction that build on students' existing dialectal competencies rather than ignoring or suppressing them. Such an approach would not only improve

nahwu learning outcomes but would also honor the extraordinary linguistic richness of the Arabic-speaking world that is brought to life in the multilingual, multidialectal classrooms of Indonesian Islamic higher education.

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