

The Role of Social Factors on Qomi Dialect as a Regional Variety of Persian

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Abstract

The present study aims at introducing two varieties of language or more clearly two dialects existing among Qomi Iranians as two separate regional dialects of the many varieties of Persian language. The study of these two dialects simply shows the relationship between language and social classes, namely, low and high variety. As such, the researcher investigated Qomi dialect as one of the most ancient and famous dialects of the Persian language in Iran. As a matter of fact, there exists two dialects in the city of Qom as regional dialects of Persian showing the distinctive variety of local colorings in the language. For the purpose of the study, 40 people were randomly chosen from low class dialect (low variety) living in a so-called low-class areas, and 40 others from higher class regions. The speeches of the two dialects were observed, recorded and transcribed. Interviews were also done to assess the people's perception. The findings of the study suggest that there exists a mutual impact of social factors and the regional dialect, stipulating the fact that dialects to some extents are bound to some certain social factors such as geographical region, religion, social class, gender, and ethnicity, and the fact that the relationship between different people from different dialect groups with the immigrants from other cities and countries are all creating a mixed new dialect that is constantly changing and is full of various cultural aspects taken from the original speakers of the existing various dialects.

Keywords: Social class, dialect, religion, gender, ethnicity, immigrants.

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Introduction

In defining the meaning of society, one would say any group of people drawn together for a certain purpose or shared purposes. Normally, first and foremost, language is simply defined as what the members of a particular society speak. Fundamentally a language is a system of communication with its unique syntactic, semantic, lexical and phonological features. A dialect, however, embodies a localized variation of a language formed by environmental, regional, cultural or social factors. Generally, 'Qomi' is one of the Persian dialects spoken in the city of Qom in the Qom province of Iran. This dialect is located in the territory of the central dialects of Iran. This language is mostly used in the lower areas of Qom. In society of the Qom city, two kinds of language variety or dialect are observable: one is peculiar to low class people still being used and prevalent among those people who are originally from Qom, known as Qomi dialect or also called 'Qomi Pa'een Shahri' [downtown/ghetto Qomi]; that is, lower dialect of Qom, and the other one which is the higher class dialect peculiar to other regions especially the upper class regions or neighborhood which is called 'Qomi Bala Shahri' [uptown Qomi].¹ Naturally, the vernacular status of the lower class dialect is observable more in the lower level regions, but the new generation mostly tend to use the standard or more standard dialect. There is also a third form of dialect which is a patois that the immigrants from rural areas have brought with themselves, but since a dialect normally has a wider geographical distribution than a patois, and the mentioned dialect is very similar to low class and intermingled with the low variety, it is not considered as a separate one, and thus will not be the topic of the discussion of this study.



1. The first is used by people of some neighborhoods such as Azar, Istgah, Imam, Haft-e Tir, and Keywanfar, and the latter is used in some neighborhoods such as Salariyeh, Jomhuri, Bolvar-e Amin, and Golestan.

Methodology

For the purpose of the study, 40 people were randomly chosen from low class dialect (low variety) living in a so-called low-class area such as Azar neighborhood of Qom, and 40 others from higher class regions such as Salariyyeh neighborhood of Qom. They were asked to talk about their families, relatives, neighbors, daily routines, past memories, neighborhood, etc. to elicit their usual accent/dialect. They were told that these pieces of information will be used for social research purposes, so that they talked normally with their usual real dialect. The speeches of the two dialects were observed, recorded and transcribed. Interviews were also done to assess the people's perception. Some considerable pieces of information with regard to the role of gender, ethnicity, local/regional dialect and so forth were gained through the interviewee's explanations and comments. The extracts from the interviews and the transcribed materials provided the researcher with helpful information on Qomi regional dialect, low-class and high-class dialect, femininity, ethnicity, etc. to achieve the purpose of the study.

Low Level/Class Dialect

The low variety or low-level dialect in Qom which is well-known as pa'een shahri Qomi dialect is a non-standard dialect enjoying its special differences especially regarding the phonetic system of its consonants and vowels with the standard Persian. For instance, the length of vowels in the first syllable is hypercorrective; that is, more than the normal length such as in the word 'nagou' /nægu:/ [Don't say!] which the pronunciation changes to /næ:gu:/, or the use of /æ/ is more prevalent in the first syllable of the negative verbs like in 'namishe' /næmifə/ [It can't be done] instead of 'nemishe' /nəmifə/; 'namtoonam' /næmtu:næm/ [I can't] for 'nemitoonam' /nəmitu:næm/ in which a vowel deletion has also occurred, or the use of /a:/ instead of /ɔ:/ as in the word 'kola' /kɔ:la:/ [hat] whose pronunciation in Qomi pa'een shahri dialect is /ka:la:/, or the phone /ə/ for the phone /ɔ:/ in 'peshtabun' /peʃtæbu:n/ for 'poshtebam' /pɔ:ʃteba:m/ [roof] in which 3 vowel changes and 1 consonant alteration are seen, and the strange uses of conjugation in the third person plural addressing 'namkhoritoun' /næmxɔ:ri:tu:n/ for 'nemikhorid' /nemixɔ:ri:d/ in

which 1 vowel alteration, i.e., /ne/ to /næ/, 1 consonant alteration, i.e., /d/ to /t/, 1 vowel addition, i.e., **u:**, 1 consonant addition, i.e., **n** as the final {conjugating} consonant, and 1 vowel deletion, i.e., /i/ have happened.

This kind of dialect was originally peculiar to traditional original Qomi people, but with the settlement of some immigrants from Qom's rural areas, it was somehow more accented and stressed. Moreover, as reported by Statistical Centre of Iran (2020), Qom is a city full of immigrants from almost all other Iranian cities who have come there for occupational, business or religious purposes besides a large number of immigrants who have come to study in Qom Seminary, and all of the mentioned groups have their own dialects but because they have intermingled one another through marriage, work, and so forth, their dialects especially the new generation has changed to a semi-neutral dialect which is not inclined to any of the original ones. In fact, they have tried to choose the standard Persian dialect as their lingua franca, yet to some extent an amalgamation of all existing dialects has emerged a fusion and hybridization of dialects that has created an affected standard Persian dialect and not a pure one.

Notably, the new generation especially ladies belonging to traditional families in Qom, get themselves more involved in a standard Persian and closer to it. In other words, classic Qomi dialect is rejected by females¹ and they try as much as possible to keep themselves away from classic dialect. The genderlect can account for this. Trudgill (2003) offers several possible explanations for females using forms associated with the prestigious standard more frequently than males. Based on many observed cases by the researcher in this regard, Trudgill's (2003) remarks can come true for Qomi women. He suggests that females may be more status-conscious, because they feel or are less \secure and have less well-developed social networks than males. Women's social position is usually inferior to men's and they are usually subordinate to them. As a matter of fact, with regard to selecting

1. One of the observed important differences was that the female participants, living in low-level regions rejected to have low class dialect, and thus chose a high-class dialect; that is, the one which was close to the dialect of the high-class regions or more precisely the one being more standard or closer to the standard language.



the dialects the femininity is counted as one of the significant intervening factors. Whereas men are judged by what they do, women are related on how they appear, and an important part of that appearance is their speech. Women need to use language to signal their social status than do men. Trudgill's (2003) general conclusion in his studies is fully applicable to women in Qom, for they showed a stronger preference than man for the standard pronunciation. This is exactly what happens in women at lower-level areas and women whose fathers or husbands are belonging to nonstandard working-class dialect in Qom.

Trudgill's (2003) remarks and the findings of the present study in this concern are complement to Labov's (1990) statements. This type of change in Qomi women's dialect is a change from above. Females generally are in the vanguard of changes from above. According to the observed, recorded and also interviewed remarks of women, they especially those living in low class regions in Qom confessed that they ask males of their families to speak with the standard or neutral dialect and not with the Qomi pa'een shahri dialect.¹

It should be mentioned that the mentioned dialect is not merely restricted to some variations in the pronunciation of the Persian words, but there exist also many words which are unique to this dialect mostly being inherited from the Old Persian, some of which are still used, especially by some older neighborhoods. As a matter of fact, these words in the Farsi dialect of the Qom region are totally different from the standard Persian (Faqihi, 2000).

The words of pa'een shahri dialect usually called 'Qomi dialect' with its unique and special phonemic and phonetic features and also some words of this dialect which are not only different in pronunciation and length of vowels, but also in meaning are indubitably in need of some separate focused research, and thus is out of the concern of the present study.

1 If one wishes to signify some dialect geography for Qomi pa'een shahri dialect, he can refer to some neighborhoods such as Azar, Shah Sayyid Ali [the people of the district call it Shasdali /ʃa:sdæli:/], Imam St., Istgah St., and Abshar St.

High Level/ Class Dialect

Unlike low-class dialect, this kind of dialect has no special name and if it is to be named, the general people may call it 'bilahjeh' /bi:læhje/ which means neutral or zero dialect. Obviously, phonologically speaking, this form of dialect is not neutral; however, it is more similar to the standard Persian dialect which is the very Tehrani dialect. The geographical location of Qom, that is, its closeness to Tehran has had its effect on the Qomi people's dialect. It should be noted that some 30 years ago Qom used to be a city of Tehran province.

This caused the comings and goings of the people between these two cities. Therefore, this has been a very influential element in changing the dialects of the people of the city closer to the Tehrani dialect. The influence has remained on Qomi natives even now. Moreover, there are lots of people commuting to Tehran every day, every week, or regularly for commercial business and occupational purposes. The high-class dialect in Qom is very close to the Tehrani dialect, of course, with little fusion of some other Iranian dialects, since as implied earlier Qom is a multinational and multi-ethnic city due to a great number of immigrants. Some immigrants have come for occupational or business purposes. Apparently, most people who have immigrated to this city, have come to be a member of Qom Seminary; however, this is only some parts of a fact. The role of religion and Qom as a religious city is crucial. Many religious people throughout Iran and even other countries in the world have immigrated merely for religious purposes (Ash'ari, 2016) especially for religious studies.¹ Notably, Turkish, Kurdish, Lori and other ethnic groups from different Iranian cities such as Tabriz, Zanjan, Qazvin, Hamedan, Arak, Khorramabad, etc. live in this city for the time being. By the same token, there also exist a lot of Afghans, Arabs, Pakistanis, Indians, Africans, and other ethnicities and nationalities. According to Statistical Centre of Iran (2020), the largest number of immigrants are people from the North of Iran that is Mazandaran and Gilan provinces especially from Mazandaran, occupying key positions in

1. Qom is considered a holy city due to the presence of the Holy Shrine of Her Excellency Lady Fatimah Ma'soumah, and Qom Islamic Seminary is the biggest and the most important Islamic seminary in the world.

organizations, offices, and governmental jobs.

An Interesting point is that there are more than 100.000 clergies (Pegah-e Khabar, 2021) in Qom including 80.000 Iranians and 20.000 International, having their own style of speaking especially concerning the way they greet (i.e., salutations and leave-takings). This has changed the way of some ordinary people's greetings, especially those being in more contact with the clergies. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that there exist about 20.000 International clergies from different countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Thailand, China, Japan, India, Nigeria, Spain, Argentina, Australia, Canada, the US, Great Britain. According to the statistics reported by Irna (2020), tens of thousands of religious scholars and international students of 136 nationalities from around the world study at Al-Mustafa International University as one of the most important universities of the Islamic Republic of Iran in religious, Islamic and language studies and human sciences . Indubitably, all the above-mentioned factors have affected on the high level/class dialect changing it to be a mixed dialect that encompasses all the exposed accents and at the same time it is similar to none of the exposed accents, and thus such an accent cannot be considered as a zero dialect as it has wrongly been understood so by the common people.

It is worth mentioning that the relationship between different people from the low and high class dialect groups and their relations, connections, and communications with the immigrants from other Iranian cities and from different countries throughout the world are all creating a mixed new dialect possessing some mixed features of its components. The newly-emerged dialect in Qom is for sure, dynamic, i.e., constantly changing and it is full of various cultural aspects taken from the original speakers of the various dialects. Other social impacts and outcomes of the intermingled people in Qom on their lifestyles can be each, as a topic of a demanding research.

Regional Dialect and Ethnicity

Dialects and accents are under the effects of two factors of regions and ethnicities (Kerswill, 2012). As noted earlier, the low-level-dialect regions have been separated from high-level- dialect



regions. During recent years, the number of people and buildings in high-level-dialect areas has notably increased and more and more people settle in these regions or close to them, while in low-level-dialect areas, no increase of population or buildings is observed. Those moving to the high-class areas are losing their low-level dialects because of their interaction with their neighbors. This is particularly observed in women and children having more contact with their neighbors. Outstandingly, two regions are more representative of low variety and high variety. They are 'Azar' and 'Salariyyeh' respectively. Azar is the representative of low variety, that is, low-level dialect and Salariyyeh the representative of high variety, that is, high-level dialect. This phenomenon is to the extent that people say 'Azari dialect' and 'Salariyyeh'i dialect' instead of saying low class dialect and high-class dialect respectively.

Another point is that sometimes, one variety or dialect becomes very identified with an ethnic group. By the word ethnicity, in this article, I mean originality; that is, an issue which shows mostly highlighting the living place by the original inhabitants of that place. As Hornberger and McKay (2010) put it presenting a clear-cut definition for ethnicity is difficult, but whatever related to an ethnic group can be considered as an ethnicity issue. With regard to ethnicity, speakers of the Qomi dialect have differentiated themselves from speakers of semi-standard variety (here, I mean natural/zero dialect). As such, they show hyper-corrective tendencies in lengthening some vowels in some words, or sometimes they change short vowels to long ones or vice versa. Those natives who speak with low-level/class dialect are actually emphasizing their ethnicity deliberately as to show off that they are original natives to show the ownership of the city against the immigrants and they try to express that they have always been living in Qom as their ancestors had been originally from there as they claim so. Therefore, most of the time, they talk thoroughly in low-class dialect to show their ethnicity and originality.



Conclusion

Through a sociolinguistic view of regional dialect, the present case study, suggests regional dialect situations may be bound and due to some important elements, such as geographical region of the living place, religion, social class, femininity, and ethnicity. There exist two varieties, namely as low and high in the city of Qom. The two varieties have separated social classes resulting a situation that is strictly bound to the specific regions of their presence. The low variety or non-standard dialect is indicator of being low-class in the eyes of other group(s) of speakers and even the common people. To some accountable extents, the geographical characteristics of the neighborhoods in Qom, and the immigrants can account for such social class separation. There are different ideas with regard to the two dialects spoken. While some females of low variety group reject to speak with their own dialect and try their best to show a neutral dialect or a more standard one like that of the high variety group, and some know the low-level dialect as the index of being low class, the natives of Qom whose ancestors had been living there, know low level dialect as the sign of being proud and the index of their ethnicity and originality. Anyway, the dialect of low variety known as Qomi pa'een shahri/ Azari dialect has its own wonderful characteristics lexically, morphologically, phonemically, phonetically, idiomatically, and so forth, enjoying a high capacity for further hundreds of delightful researches.

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نقش عوامل اجتماعی در گویش قمی به عنوان یک تنوع منطقه ای زبان فارسی

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چکیده

هدف پژوهش حاضر معرفی دو گونه زبانی یا به عبارتی دو گویش موجود در میان ایرانیان قمی به عنوان دو گویش منطقه ای مجزا از انواع متعدد گونه های زبان فارسی است. بررسی این دو گویش به سادگی رابطه زبان و طبقات اجتماعی که در اصطلاح به آن ها، گونه سطح پایین و گونه سطح بالا گفته می شود را نشان می دهد. با این هدف، محقق به بررسی گویش قمی به عنوان یکی از کهن ترین و معروف ترین گویش های زبان فارسی در ایران پرداخته است. در واقع، در شهر قم دو گویش به عنوان گویش های منطقه ای فارسی وجود دارد که نشان دهنده تنوع متمایز گونه محلی در زبان است. به منظور مطالعه، ۴۰ نفر از گویش های پایین طبقه (گونه سطح پایین) ساکن در مناطق به اصطلاح اجتماعی کم برخوردار و ۴۰ نفر دیگر از مناطق طبقه برخوردار به طور تصادفی انتخاب شدند. گفتارهای دو گویش مشاهده، ضبط و بر روی کاغذ پیاده شد. مصاحبه هایی نیز برای ارزیابی برداشت مردم انجام شد. یافته های پژوهش حاکی از تأثیر متقابل عوامل اجتماعی و گویش منطقه ای است که بیانگر این واقعیت است که گویش ها تا حدودی به عوامل اجتماعی خاصی مانند منطقه جغرافیایی، مذهب، طبقه اجتماعی، جنسیت و قومیت وابسته هستند و ارتباط بین افراد مختلف از گروه های گویش های مختلف با مهاجران شهرها و کشورهای دیگر، همگی گویش جدیدی را به وجود می آورد که دائماً در حال تغییر است و مملو از جنبه های فرهنگی گوناگون برگرفته از گویندگان اصلی گویش های مختلف موجود است.

واژگان کلیدی

طبقه اجتماعی، گویش، مذهب، جنسیت، قومیت، مهاجران.

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