



## Lexical Variations in Baghdad and Najaf Dialects: A Sociolinguistic Study

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### Abstract

The current study aims to investigate lexical variations between the dialects spoken in Baghdad and Najaf, two linguistically significant cities in Iraq. The research focuses on the vocabulary that characterizes these two dialects, offering insights into the country's regional linguistic diversity. Key concepts such as language, society, Iraqi Arabic, and dialectology are examined to lay the groundwork for the analysis. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, providing an in-depth exploration of vocabulary use by people in both governorates. Finally, the findings indicate that there are significant regional variations in the vocabulary used in social interactions in the Baghdad and Najaf dialects, reflecting the unique identity of each region and the rich linguistic diversity present in Iraq. In addition, many historical, religious, social, and cultural factors play a significant role in shaping the lexical features of the dialects in these two cities.

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### 1. Introduction

Iraqi Arabic is characterized by a hallmark of dialectal variation, a language spoken in diverse regions with a wide linguistic variety. However, Linguistic varieties are different forms of a language that exist within a speech community. These varieties can be studied based on several factors, such as geographical factors (related to regional dialects), social factors (including age, gender, class, or ethnicity), functional factors such as registers or styles, and finally, individual factors, which cover the idiolects (Milroy, 1992) <sup>[15]</sup>.

Moreover, one significant aspect of the linguistic varieties is lexical variation, which is the core of this paper. It refers to different vocabulary used by diverse groups of people who speak the same language. This variation can be examined within regional dialects in which people from different regions may use distinct words to refer to the same thing (Crystal, 2003) <sup>[8]</sup>.

According to Trudgill (1990) <sup>[18]</sup>, if people are geographically isolated, regional differences in vocabulary will appear as a result of cultural factors, historical isolation, migration, or even special characteristics of the region.

Iraq, as a country, has a great population diversity, and as a result, different dialects are used according to the different regions. Moreover, because this country is located in a strategic position, connecting the Arabian Gulf with the Levant, Anatolia, and Iran, includes the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and finally, its big cities such as Baghdad, Babylon, Mosul, and Al-Basrah were political and commercial centers. So, it was an arena of competition between Eastern and Western empires. It has been invaded by many different colonists throughout the history, such as the Mongols, Persians, Ottomans, and many others. Each left a noticeable mark on the Iraqi dialects, especially the Baghdad and Najaf dialects.

Furthermore, to classify the whole local dialects according to their regional variations in Iraq, one must exert a lot of effort. Many academic articles and research have been written about Iraqi Arabic and the local dialects in different areas, such as Basra, Mosul, Baghdad, and Wasit provinces, but there is no study conducted about the lexical variations in the Baghdad and Najaf dialects together. This leaves a gap in the study of the Iraqi dialects.

The current study aims to fill the gap from a sociolinguistic perspective. It tackles two significant dialects in Iraq to show their regional variations concerning the vocabulary level. This will be achieved through the following aims:

1. Identifying the lexical differences that are used in everyday language in the Baghdad and Najaf dialects.
2. Discovering the factors that contribute to this lexical variation.
3. Exploring whether the vocabulary differences still exist among the young people, or if they are starting to disappear.
4. Documenting the original vocabularies before it disappeared or become less common because of social media and the development of the world, which affects the original words and replaces them with new ones from other communities.

### 1.1. Questions of the Study

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the vocabulary differences that are used in everyday language in the Baghdad and Najaf dialects?
2. What are the factors that contribute to this lexical variation?
3. Do the vocabulary differences still exist among the young people, or are they starting to disappear?

### 1.2. Significance of the Study

Iraq is a country with different dialects. It includes regional diversity that reflects the culture and history of each area. The comparative analysis of lexical variations between Baghdad and Najaf dialects provides clear data about the vocabulary differences and the reasons behind them. This will contribute a lot to the field of sociolinguistics and dialectology.

It is also important for other communities as it will enhance the cultural awareness inside and outside Iraq. Besides, the lexical variations can affect communication, so linguists, educators, and those who need to interact with other regions or societies need to understand them accurately.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Language and Society

If language is an essential factor that represents people's identity, then society is the bowl that includes all the cultures and identities presented through language. Language is a way of communication that is related to the performance of a single linguistic norm or a collection of norms. This means that it would be "*a unitary system of linguistic communication that subsumes several mutually intelligible varieties.*" (Wardhaugh, 2015) <sup>[21]</sup>.

On the other hand, sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies how language varies and changes in social groups. It focuses on the interactions between language and society, in which language is seen as a social product acquired and shaped by people in social settings (Al-Ali & Arafa, 2010).

Furthermore, sociolinguistics includes a number of issues, such as language and identity, language variation and change, language and power, language and culture, etc. Then, it can be said that sociolinguistics explores the dynamic relationship between language and society. Besides, it helps

people understand the differences in language and dialect that arise based on elements such as geographical region, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, occupation, gender, education level, and many others (Wardhaugh, 2015) <sup>[21]</sup>.

Moreover, language in any society is influenced by geographical and social factors. The geographical aspect of the study of language varieties tackles the regional variations, while the social aspect looks into social group variations, as they will be explained in the following section.

### 2.2. Dialectology

It is a branch of sociolinguistics that studies dialects. Dialectology explores how each dialect differs from another by investigating the historical, geographical, and social factors that contribute to the development and divergence of dialects.

The interest in this term emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century when grammar books and dialect dictionaries were first printed in Western Europe. Dialectologists systematically analyze dialectal variation by collecting data through interviews and recordings (Chambers & Trudgill, 1998) <sup>[6]</sup>. Moreover, its main aim is to understand the connections between the different dialects and how people make them fit into the broader structure of language (Trudgill, 2004) <sup>[19]</sup>.

However, dialectology is the study of dialect, but what is meant by dialect? According to Trudgill (2004), dialects are varieties of language that differ from each other in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. They refer to the form of language that is used in isolated parts of the world by a specific group of people. Dialects can be considered as a kind of deviation from the norm as "distortions of a correct or standard form of language" that do not have a written form. The term dialect includes two types: regional and social dialects. Regional dialect occurs when the differences based on geographical factors, such as countries or cities. This type is used by people in a specific geographical area within a speech community (Spolsky, 1998: 29) <sup>[17]</sup>. It denotes the different styles of a language concerning the meaning and the usage of specific words. Then, regional dialect "*is a term used to map the distributions of various linguistic features to show their geographical provenance.*" (Wardhaugh, 2015, p. 43).

On the other hand, social dialects are related to social groups under the aspect of social class, education, and gender. This type aims to distinguish and classify social classes (Hudson, 1996: 39) <sup>[11]</sup>. The current study is limited to the first type of dialect.

Moreover, James (1998: 12) <sup>[13]</sup> states that one type of linguistic diversity that people notice and comment on frequently is the lexical variation or vocabulary differences. These differences are common enough to be symbols of the diversity between the geographical regions. Lexical differences play an essential role in regional dialectology. Therefore, they are given major attention by the sociolinguists and dialectologists.

### 2.3. Iraqi Arabic (IA)

The country of Iraq is located in Southwest Asia, south of Turkey, north of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, west of Iran, and

east of Jordan and Syria. The ancient name of Iraq is “*Mesopotamia*”. It means the land between the rivers (Al-Ani and Al-Birazy, 1979).

However, it is a big country that has Arabic, Turkmen, Kurdish, and Syriac languages. The official language is Classical Arabic “al Fussha”. Other languages are known as regional ones. The Iraqi dialect is distinguished by its diversity due to its proximity to Classical Arabic and the ability of people in Iraq to pronounce the sounds of “al Fussha” correctly, unlike other Arab countries, in which some letters are not pronounced (Johnston, 1975) <sup>[12]</sup>.

The spoken language in Iraq, Iraqi Arabic, is one of the varieties of Standard Arabic that belongs to a group of colloquial dialects, the north-eastern Arab dialects, that contain Jordanian, Palestinian, Lebanese, and Syrian. Erwin (2004) <sup>[9]</sup> mentions that there are three main dialects in Iraq based on their regional distribution: northern, middle, and southern. Each one of these dialects has its own features.

1. The Northern dialect, which is spoken in Mosul and the neighboring provinces. It is called the qiltui-dialect because of the use of the qaf-sound.

2. The Middle or the Central Dialect (also known as Baghdadi Dialect) is used in and around Baghdad.

3. The Southern Dialect that is spoken in the southern provinces of Iraq. Sometimes, this dialect is confined only to Basra Province and all the neighboring provinces. It is characterized by utilizing the sound [g] . It is called gilit-dialect.

Blanc (1964) <sup>[5]</sup> introduces a similar classification for the dialects of Iraq. He says that IA is categorized into two different types of dialects:

1. The “qiltu-dialect” which is spoken by people in northern Iraq

2. The “gilit-dialect” which is used in central and southern Iraq.

Moreover, Iraqi dialects include many other local dialects which are different because each one has its own history and characteristics (ibid). The current research focuses on the Baghdad and Najaf Dialects.

### 2.3.1. Baghdad and Najaf Dialects

Baghdad and Najaf are two prominent cities in Iraq with different cultures, history, and geographic locations. Both cities belong to the A-cluster dialect of contemporary Arabic varieties. Baghdad and Najaf dialects belong to the Mesopotamian dialect group (Kamil Murad, 2007) <sup>[16]</sup>.

#### 2.3.1.1. Baghdad Dialect

Baghdad dialect is the capital's linguistic variety. It is spoken by the populations of Baghdad and the central regions of Iraq, such as Diyala, Samarra, Balad, and Dijail. Baghdad's position as a political and commercial governorate paves the way for its dialect to absorb influences from various languages, including Ottoman Turkish, Persian, and English. This gives the dialect a dynamic nature, reflecting the city's historical and cultural diversity.

However, this dialect is characterized by its clarity, simplicity, slow speech, and sophistication. It is the closest dialect to the modern classical language. The Baghdad dialect is varied with regard to its different areas, such as Risafa and Karikh, and it is connected with the middle and upper class, as it emerged in the 1930's of the 20th century (Al- Shalghi, 1979).

#### 2.3.1.2. Najaf Dialect

Najaf is located about 150 km away from Baghdad in the south. It has an important historical role as a religious, cultural, and social center, as it is the burial place of Al-Imam Ali. Besides, it has the largest cemetery in the world (Wadi Al-Salaam), and the oldest Shi'a Islamic seminary, Al-Hawza of Najaf, a center of Shia scholarship. Because of all of these reasons, the Najaf dialect has maintained a more traditional and conservative linguistic structure, with the local dialect often viewed as a marker of identity and cultural pride (Blanc, 1964) <sup>[5]</sup>.

Unlike Baghdad, Najaf's dialect keeps the classical lexical choices which reflect its rural and religious heritage, with fewer foreign influences resulting in a dialect that is more authentic and closer to classical Arabic (al-Turjuman, 2000). Despite all the above words, the Najaf dialect possesses many foreign words such as Persian, Turkish, and English, as a result of the succession of Iranian, Ottoman, and British governments in Iraq.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research Design

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with native speakers from both regions to explore the lexical variations between the Baghdad and Najaf dialects. Semi-structured interviews provide a “*flexible form of qualitative data collection that balances structure with openness.*” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) <sup>[14]</sup>.

Besides, qualitative methods are effective for exploring complex phenomena like dialectal variation. This approach is suitable for this research because *it provides an in-depth analysis of the sociolinguistic distinctions in different languages.*” (Creswell, 2013) <sup>[7]</sup>

The participants were asked to provide examples of their vocabulary concerning food, household, and social terms. Then, a comparison was made based on the collected data.

### 3.2. Participants

Participants were selected based on the following: living in the city for the last 20 years, aged between 30 and 65. The study included a total of 20 participants, with 10 members for each language group. Participants were evenly split by gender to ensure a balanced representation.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Vocabulary differences between Baghdad and Najaf dialects will be conducted and analyzed according to specific points: food terms, household tools, and social utterances.

**Table 1: Food Terms**

No.	Word in English	Baghdad	Najaf
1	Squash	شجر (shejar)	كطين (Ikteen)
2	Barbin	بربين (berbeen)	أبيرده (Ibberdaa)
3	Ice- cream	موطا (muta )	دوندرمة (donderma)
4	Spinach	سبيناغ (spenag)	سبزي (saabzy)
5	Rice+carrot	تمن جزر (tim' man jezar)	تهجينة جزر (tahjenat jezer)
6	Kabab	كباب عروك (Kabab oroog)	كباب طاوه (kabab Tawa)
7	Bread+meat	خبز عروك (Kobz oroook)	خبز لحم (kobz laham)

**Table 2: Household Terms**

No.	Word in English	Baghdad	Najaf
1	Living room	الخطار (Kotar)	الأستقبال (al-estiqbal)
2	Oven glove	وگایه أو وصله كدر (wiqaya)	تزگیره (tezgera)
3	Water jug	سراحيه (sarraheya)	دولچه (dolkaa)
4	Glass bowl	كاسه (kasaa)	منچاسه (menchasaa)
5	Mattress	دوشك (doshak)	مندر (mander)
6	Saucer	ماعون چاي (maoon shaiy)	نعلبكي (na'lbakee)
7	Stockpot	جدر (jeder)	گدر (geded)
8	Steel bowel	لجاناه (lejanaah)	معينه (maa'jna)
9	Light	گلوب (klob)	برقي (bargy)
10	Tap water	بوري (boory)	لوله (lola)
11	Room	غرفه (korfa)	گبه (kobbaa)
12	Bed	چربايه (chorbaya)	قربوله (karyola)
13	Chair	كرسي (korsi)	سكملي (sekamle)
15	Latch	سرقى (sergy)	سركاطه (sergada)

**Table 3: Social Terms**

NO.	Word in English	Baghdad	Najaf
1	Alley	مجاز (majaz)	دولان (dolan)
2	Yesterday	البارحة (al-barhaa)	امس (ames)
3	Baby Cradle	مهده (mahad)	كاروك (karook)
4	Behind	وره (waraa)	كفه (kafaa)
5	In order to	حتى (hatta)	مهاله (mahalla)
6	Waking	مشي (mashi)	پياده (peyada)
7	Narrow alley	دربونه (darbonaa)	عكد (aged)
8	Glasses	نظارات (natharat)	مناندر (manather)
9	It is here	هياته أو هياته (hyataa)	هنا وياه (hatha we yaahh)
10	Generator	السحب (al- saheb)	المولدة (al- molladaa)
11	Husseini Ma'tam	قراية (qraya)	تعزية (ta'zzya)
12	So	لعد (la'ed)	چا (cha)
13	Take it easy	عله كيف (Ala kaefak)	يواش (yawash)
14	I thought that	حسبالي (hasbally)	بناني أو ابنتاني (bana'ee)
15	Look	باوع (bawe?)	عاين (ayen)
16	Enough	كافي (kafi)	بيزي (yezi)
17	String of lights	شجرة أضواء وزينة (nashrat adwaa)	چراغون (jaragon)
18	Bad or difficult thing	تعبانه (ta'banaa)	بايون (bayoon)

In addition to the above vocabulary differences, the study finds that Baghdad and Najaf dialects share many other basic lexical items. This similarity means that the two dialects have a huge shared linguistic legacy in Iraqi Arabic, and they belong to the same group of Iraqi dialects.

### 3.4. Discussion

From the interviews that have been conducted. It can be said that there are noticeable lexical differences between Baghdad and Najaf dialects. Besides, different factors contributed to form Baghdad and Najaf dialects since their dialects were affected by historical, social, and cultural influences. Baghdad, because of its position as the capital of Iraq, its

historical significance as an economic and political center, its diverse population, in addition to the Mongols, Persian, and Ottoman invasions, it can be described as a bowl that mixes all these different powers to shape a huge part of its dialect. On the other hand, the Najaf dialect is influenced by its deep historical and religious importance, which introduces this city as the main center of Shia scholarships, and the existence of the Imam Ali shrine makes it a Holy city that paves the way for members from other countries and societies to come and interact with the Najaf community. Besides, the traditionalism in Najaf has a spiritual dimension that makes its population as the most homogeneous one. Again, all these factors contribute a lot to form the Najaf dialect.

Finally, it has been noticed that older people use many words that younger people do not use in their everyday conversations. While there is a repetition of many words, the youth still do not utilize many terms as older people do. This indicates that the new generation has been affected by many factors, such as language development, social media, and the internet, which allows them to interact with other societies around the world. In addition, because of the young's desire to build a new generation society and identity, they tend to use new expressions that distinguish them from the old generation.

#### 4. Conclusions

Based on what has been discussed above, the current study has come up with the following conclusions:

1. There are significant regional lexical variations in the level of vocabulary within more than 40 words used in everyday interactions in Baghdad and Najaf. These variations between Baghdad and Najaf dialects illustrate the rich linguistic diversity in Iraq.
2. The lexical variations in Baghdad and Najaf reflect the unique identity of each city and the complex interplay of internal and external linguistic influences. Baghdad's vocabulary exhibits more variation due to its diverse population and historical influences. On the other hand, the presence of unique terms in Najaf suggests a more localized linguistic evolution influenced by traditional, cultural, and religious factors.
3. Historical, religious, social, and cultural factors play a significant role in the process of shaping the linguistic features of the dialects in these two cities.
4. Older people use many words that younger people do not utilize in their everyday conversations because the new generation has been affected by many factors, such as language development, social media, the internet, and the desire to build a new society for their generation.
5. In addition to the lexical variations, Baghdad and Najaf dialects have a huge shared linguistic heritage as they belong to the same Iraqi Arabic group of dialects.

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