

Speakers of Palestinian Arabic Spoken in Israel (PASII) have been reported to exhibit several phonological features, which can be characterized as results of various types of lenition. Rosenhouse (2002) mentions four main processes, which from a variationist point of view are indicative of four sociolinguistic variables:

- simplification of geminates in certain environments
- shortening of long vowels
- loss of secondary velarization/pharyngealization of the so-called emphatic coronals
- glottalization or deletion of the voiced pharyngeal fricative

A corpus of urban Palestinian Arabic, comprising some forty sociolinguistic interviews from Israel and the West Bank, is used as a test case to empirically verify these general descriptions of PASII phenomena. As a first step, the first two variables – both having to do with segment length – are examined using a subset of the corpus comprising seventeen speakers. All speakers examined are of Muslim origin; they are stratified by age group, gender and community. The latter stratification, that of community, is of particular interest, as it has the most correlation with degree of bilingualism and language contact. Eleven of the seventeen speakers sampled are Israeli citizens who live in a coastal town in central Israel; the remaining six are Palestinians from an urban area in the West Bank, where Hebrew is rarely spoken. This smaller group of speakers functions in this study as a control group, as it consists of speakers of a non-Israeli urban variety of Palestinian Arabic (PA).

Levin (1994) notes that in Jerusalem Arabic, a dialect close to the ones under investigation, long vowels tend to shorten in unstressed syllables. Rosenhouse (2002) also limits her description of segment shortening to particular phonetic environments. The current study takes for granted Levin's and some of Rosenhouse's assumptions and includes measurements of segment lengths in environments not previously considered, most notably stressed syllables, where both long vowels and geminated consonants are expected to maintain their phonemic length.

It has been hypothesized elsewhere that PASII speakers may differ from speakers of other varieties of PA in the implementation of these ongoing phonological changes, mainly because the results of these changes resemble features characteristic of Israeli Hebrew, with which PASII – but not other varieties of PA – is in constant contact. The current study examines the qualitative aspects of this hypothesis, while providing quantitative support for the fine distinctions that are to be made between the various social strata included in the corpus.

This study, focusing on variation regarding a rather simple phonological process, sets the stage for a second phase of research involving more phonological changes involving both primary and secondary pharyngeal articulation of consonants. The second stage, the direction of which is outlined at the end of the full version of the current paper, will also include a more sophisticated analysis of some of the social factors that contribute to the intensity of contact, e.g., religious affiliation (Muslim/Christian), type of schooling (public/private; language of instruction), and occupation.