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A Variational-Pragmatic Account of Hearer-Oriented Clitics in Jordanian Arabic

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This study aims to analyze the hearer-oriented clitic in Jordanian Arabic from a variational perspective. Even though there has been extensive research to examine this clitic, earlier studies have focused mainly on analyzing this clitic from a grammatical or socio-pragmatic perspective. Recent studies that examine this clitic from a generative perspective show that this clitic is subject to dialectical variation. However, such a claim lacks empirical evidence. This study, therefore, seeks to answer questions related to the sociolinguistic status of this pragmatic marker in Jordanian Arabic. The study examines the impact of sociolinguistic factors, namely age, gender, and region, on realizing this clitic. The data is collected through face-to-face sociolinguistic interviews with sixteen persons from Jordan. To analyze the data quantitatively, the researchers used GoldVarb X. The findings show that Haddad's (2018) conclusion may lead to hasty generalization. Nevertheless, the study supports Al-Raba'a (2020) observation that hearer-oriented clitics are subject to dialectical variation.

Keywords: *language variation and change, hearer-oriented clitics, pragmatic variation, social factors*

1 Introduction

This study analyzes hearer-oriented clitics in Jordanian Arabic from a sociolinguistic perspective. Following Haddad (2018), Kalnača & Lokmane (2019: 150) define a hearer-oriented clitic as an "optional dative pronominal clitic that functions as an interpersonal pragmatic marker." Many studies (e.g., Haddad 2018; Al-Raba'a 2022; Kalnača & Lokmane 2019) demonstrate that speakers use hearer-oriented clitics in their communication to encode a representation of a hearer in a discourse setting. The following examples are representative.

(1)
a.

Zijaad	*biʔaḍḍi-lak*	*kil*	*waʔt-o*	*neejim.*
Ziyad	spend-2.M.SG[1]	all	time-his	sleeping

'Ziyad spends-[you] all his time sleeping.' (Lebanese Arabic, Haddad, 2020)

b.

ʃuft-lak	*ʔiʃi*	*ɣariib*	*eljoom.*
saw.1.SG-2.M.SG	thing	strange	today

'I saw-[you] a strange thing today.' (Jordanian Arabic, Al-Raba'a 2023)

[1] This manuscript follows Leipzig Glossing rules and the list of standard abbreviations for glosses.

(2)
a.

Es	*tev*	*gan*	*gaidīšu!*
I.NOM	you.DAT.SG	PRT	wait.FUT.1SG
Kur	*tas*	*ir*	*redzēts!*
Where	it.NOM.SG	be.AUX.PRS.3	see.PTCP.PST.PASS

'I am not going to wait! That is unheard of!

(Latvian, Kalnača & Lokmane 2019: 150)

b.

Kur	*tev*	*tik*	*vēlā*	*rudenī*
Where	you.DAT.SG	so	late.LOC.SG	autumn.LOC.SG
pērkons	*rasies!*			
thunderstorm.NOM.SG	turn_on.FUT.3			

'How on Earth should there be thunderstorm so late in the autumn!'

(Latvian, Kalnača & Lokmane 2019: 150)

Al-Raba'a (2022: 5) notices that the clitic does not impact "the truth condition of the sentence. This is confirmed by the fact that the sentences will still have the very same meaning if the clitics are deleted." In addition, eliminating the clitic does not lead to ungrammatical constructions. This is evident in the following examples.

(3)
a.

smiʕit	*xabar*	*kwajjis*	*elyoom.*
heard.1.SG	news	good	today

'I heard good news today.' (Jordanian Arabic, Al-Raba'a 2023)

b.

smiʕit-lak	*xabar*	*kwajjis*	*elyoom.*
heard.1.SG-2.M.SG	news	good	today

'I heard good news today.' (Jordanian Arabic, Al-Raba'a, 2023 adapted)

In Jordanian Arabic, research on the topic has been mostly restricted to limited attempts to view this clitic in light of generative grammar. Perhaps the most notable contribution of Al-Raba'a's (2022) study is that it explains the presence of the clitic in some utterances. However, problems arise when an attempt is made to implement the generalization to Jordanian Arabic on a wider scale. Al-Raba'a (2022) mentions that the clitic appears commonly in informal settings and in rural areas. A note of caution is due here. Does the clitic appear on formal occasions? How often do speakers use the hearer-oriented clitic in their speech? Do male speakers use this clitic more than female ones? There has been no quantitative analysis to answer those questions, but those questions trigger enough inquiries to study this clitic from a sociolinguistic perspective. By employing quantitative modes of inquiry, this study attempts to illuminate that this clitic, contrary to expectations, is not solely governed by the pragmatic context. This work contributes to existing knowledge of hearer-oriented clitics by providing a comprehensive view of what governs the use of such clitics in spontaneous speech. The study aims to view the hearer-oriented clitic as a variable and to shed light on the impact of sociolinguistic factors on the emergence of this clitic.

The overall structure of the study takes the form of five sections. The first section lays out the theoretical dimensions of this research. The second section presents a review of related literature. The purpose of the next section is to present the methodology that is followed in conducting this research. The goal of the next section is to discuss the data and presents the findings. The final section concludes the study and reflects on the extent to which this study has contributed to understanding the sociolinguistic context that governs the use of hearer-oriented clitics in Jordanian Arabic.

2 Theoretical background

This section contextualises the research by providing background information on variational pragmatics and sociolinguistic factors and their relevance to contextualise hearer-oriented clitics. The section highlights key theoretical concepts in this area and presents key features of clitics. Understanding the link between sociolinguistics and clitics will help solidify the assumptions of this research.

2.1 *Variational pragmatics*

Pragmatic variability refers to the availability of numerous possibilities for language users to produce and understand meanings, considering the situational context (Verschueren 1999). The area that studies the variability and diversity of language use in different contexts and communities is called variational pragmatics. According to Ren et al. (2013: 283), this subfield of pragmatics "focuses on the influence of geographical and social factors on language in interaction and intra-lingual variation." This area of pragmatics looks at the impact of social factors, such as gender, age, power, and the like, on the realization of a particular pragmatic phenomenon. It is involved with the examination of how linguistic and non-linguistic factors interact to produce variations in language use and how these variations are related to the communicative needs and goals of different speakers and communities (Barron & Schneider 2009; Ren et al. 2013).

Barron (2021) indicates that pragmatic variability helps with understanding various areas of inquiry. Those areas include levels such as a stylistic variation in address terms, a variation in discourse-pragmatic markers, an actional variation in speech acts, an interactional variation in sequential patterns, a variation in topic content and management, an organizational variation in terms of turn-taking) a prosodic variation, such as a variation in intonation and pitch of a sound and a variation in body language. This is exemplified by Harting (2005). He shows that there is an impact of age and gender on the variable use of '*G'day*' in an Australian context. This expression is used for greetings; nevertheless, his study shows that males and those above 30 years old tend to use '*G'day*' more in their greetings than other speakers.

In this paper, the term variational pragmatics is used in its local sense to study variation in the hearer-oriented clitic as a discourse-pragmatic marker; more specifically, this paper aims to view how Jordanians use hearer-oriented clitics in spontaneous speech, and it aims to figure out if there is a link between social factors and the emergence of the hearer-oriented clitic in their speech. For this purpose, variational pragmatics will be used as a framework to understand how this clitic varies across different age groups, genders, and other factors in this culture. Before we continue, it is crucial to understand pragmatic markers.

2.2 *Pragmatic markers*

According to Romero-Trillo (2019), pragmatic markers are linguistic elements that signal contextual information about the speaker's intended meaning and the social relationship between the speaker and the listener. They provide cues about the speaker's intentions, attitudes, and degree of certainty, among other things. Examples of pragmatic markers include intonation, stress, discourse particles (such as *well* or *you know*), and nonverbal cues (such as gestures or facial expressions) (Aijmer & Simon-Vandenbergen 2022; Erman, 2001; Maschler & Schiffrin 2015; Norrick 2009; Romero-Trillo 2019; Zienkowski 2011).

Norrick (2009) argues that pragmatic markers play an important role in determining the meaning of an utterance, as they provide additional information beyond the literal meaning of the words. For example, the intonation used when asking a question can indicate the speaker's level of certainty or doubt, while a discourse particle like *you know* can signal a speaker's desire for the listener's agreement (Columbus 2010; Tagliamonte 2006; Van Dijk 1979; Wiltschko 2017). In this way, pragmatic markers help to create a more nuanced and complete picture of the speaker's intended meaning, and they are an essential aspect of effective communication.

One of the pragmatic markers is those clitics that are used to express the speaker's attitude or stance towards the content of their utterance, and to create a more direct or intimate relationship with the listener (Al-Raba'a 2022; Barron 2021; Haddad 2018; Haddad 2013; 2014; 2019; 2020 2022; Harting 2005; Kalnača & Lokmane 2019; Ren et al. 2013). Those clitics are commonly used in spoken language and can have various functions, such as softening commands or requests, expressing politeness, seeking agreement, or expressing uncertainty. For example, in English, the clitic *huh* is often used to check if the listener is following what is being said, while in French, the clitic *n'est-ce pas* is used to seek agreement from the listener (Hansen, 2005).

In some languages, hearer-oriented clitics can play a major role in shaping the tone and style of the utterance and can greatly impact the interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning. These clitics are, therefore, an important aspect of language that help to create a more nuanced and interactive communicative experience between the speaker and the listener.

2.3 *Sociolinguistic variables*

Sociolinguistics deals with language variation across societies and cultures (Al-Wer & Horesh 2019; Bayley et al. 2012; Campbell-Kibler 2010). In language variation and change, sociolinguistic variables refer to facets of language use that are associated with particular social groups, such as age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, socioeconomic status, and geographic location (Abdelhady 2019; Campbell-Kibler 2010; Eckert 2017; Eckert & Rickford 2001; Edwards 1992; Osborne 1999; Preston 2009; Yaeger-Dror 2014). These variables can involve several linguistic features such as morphological features (Haddad 2014; Säily 2011; 2016), phonological aspects (Abdelhady 2019), semantic selections (Hasan 1989), and structural patterns (Edwards 1992).

For instance, in American English, there are several sociolinguistic variables that are associated with regional dialects, such as the use of *y'all* in the South, *pop* vs. *soda* in different parts of the country, and variations in vowel sounds (Holmes & Hazen 2013). Age is another sociolinguistic variable that can affect language use, with younger generations often adopting new slang and expressions, while older generations may stick to more traditional language patterns (Abdelhady 2019). For instance, in the Jordan Valley, a rural area in the Hashemite

Kingdom of Jordan, Abdelhady's (2019) study shows that older generations do not follow the phonological rule of the definite article assimilation (/l/ changes to +coronal/-coronals). Older generations prefer assimilating the definite prefix with all sounds. However, his study shows that younger generations refrain form doing so.

The variation in the use of pragmatic markers is influenced by several factors. Different cultures have different norms and expectations regarding the use of language in social interactions. Therefore, speakers from different cultural backgrounds may use pragmatic markers differently, based on their cultural norms. The social context of communication, such as the social relationship between speakers, their status, and the setting of the interaction, can affect the use of pragmatic markers. For example, speakers may use different pragmatic markers in a formal business meeting than in an informal conversation with friends. Research has shown that gender can influence the use of pragmatic markers. Women, for example, tend to use more hedging and polite markers than men, reflecting social norms of femininity. Speakers of different ages may use pragmatic markers differently, reflecting generational differences in language use and cultural norms. The use of pragmatic markers is also influenced by cognitive factors, such as the speaker's linguistic proficiency, communicative competence, and their ability to understand and interpret the social cues in a conversation. Sociolinguistic variables are important for understanding how language use reflects and shapes hearer-oriented clitics in Jordanian Arabic, as well as for analyzing language variation and change over time.

3 Review of related literature

This section aims to present a review of those studies and highlight the gap in the current literature that our study aims to bridge. Before proceeding to examine those studies, it is important to briefly present key studies that investigate language variation and change in Arabic. Previous research findings in language variation on Arabic will help in understanding the sociolinguistic context needed for building the framework for analyzing the variable under investigation.

Many seminal studies examine language variation and change in different Arabic cultures and contexts: Jordanian Arabic (Abdelhady 2019; Abdel-Jawad 1981), Syrian Arabic (Habib 2014), and Lebanese Arabic (Ibrahim 2009). Together these studies provide important insights into language variation and show the impact of sociolinguistic factors on the realization of diverse sociolinguistic variables. In Jordanian Arabic, a considerable amount of literature has been published on language variation and change (e.g., Abdel-Jawad 1981). These studies examine a diverse of sociolinguistic variables: phonological variation in the production consonants (Abdel-Jawad 1981), acoustic variation in the production of emphasis and interdentals (Omari & Herk 2016; Omari & Jaber 2019), lexical variation (Abdel-Jawad 1981), variation in the production of definite articles (Abdelhady 2019), variation in the production of vowels (Al-Deaibes et al. 2021) grammatical variation (Herin & Al-Wer 2013). According to Abdelhady (2019), the linguistic status in Jordan shows that "females are the ones who use urban variants, educated speakers use standard variants more than other speakers, and that young speakers are usually the ones who lead a change" (p. 15). Abdel-Jawad's (1981) studies show similar findings.

Many researchers have studied hearer-oriented clitics in Arabic from a generative perspective. (Abdelhady 2020; Al-Raba'a 2022) generally place an emphasis on the role of speech act projections (Abdelhady 2020; Abdel-Hady & Branigan 2019; Haegeman & Hill

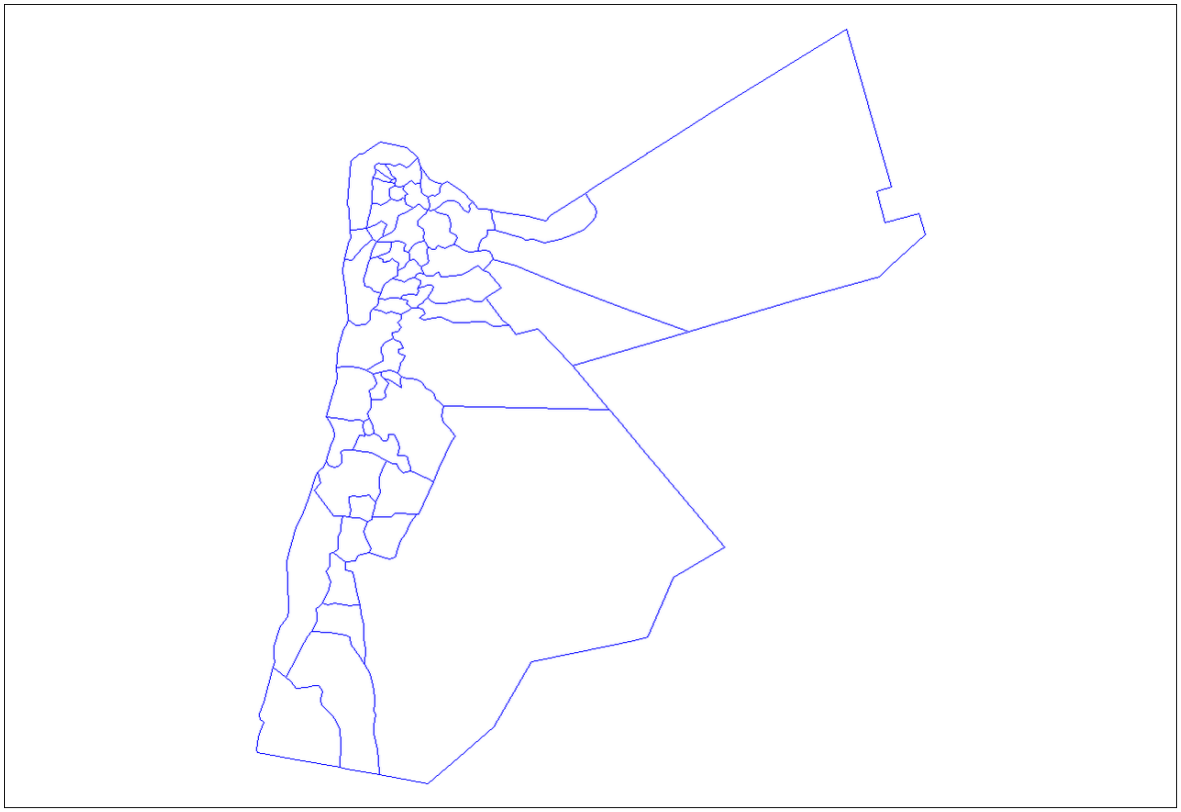
2013; Hill 2007) in generating those clitics in the syntax proper. Other studies focus on analyzing this clitic from a pragmatic or sociopragmatic perspectives (Haddad 2018; Haddad 2020; 2022). The pioneering work of Haddad (2018) reports that those clitics are governed pragmatically. His observations suggest that there may be a link between context and those clitics because it is evident for him that those clitics do not contribute to the semantic interpretation of utterances, and because omitting those clitics do not lead to ungrammatical constructions.

There remain several aspects of those clitics about which relatively little is known. This study, therefore, aims to highlight variation in such a pragmatic marker, namely, the study analyzes how sociolinguistic factors impact hearer-oriented clitics. By doing this analysis, the researchers aim to figure out if there is a dialectical variation in the realization of those clitics or not.

4 Methodology

4.1 *Regional setting*

This study quantifies hearer-oriented clitics in Jordan. Jordan, a country in the Middle East, has Arabic as its official language, but there are many variations and changes in the language due to different factors. Historical, social, and geographical influences have contributed to these variations. Throughout history, Jordan has been ruled by different powers, and their language has influenced Jordanian Arabic dialect. Socially, there are different dialects based on social class, ethnicity, and age group. Geographically, rural and urban areas also have distinct dialects. The Jordanian dialect is continually changing, reflecting the country's complex history, diverse society, and changing cultural practices. Two main regions are selected for the purpose of our study: Irbid (urban center in the north of Jordan, almost 80 KM from the capital Amman) and Al-Shouna Al-Shamlia (a rural area in the Jordan Valley located in the north-west part of Jordan). See the map below.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Jordan#/media/File:Jordan_nahias.png

The choice of two regions is because they represent an urban center and a rural area in which the researchers consider themselves in-group members with the communities living in those regions. This will help in eliminating the observer's paradox and result in having natural and spontaneous conversations with the participants.

The participants in this study were recruited from the two regions. Following Author (2019), the researchers selected the sampling of the study based on their own social network. The speech sample consists of the naturally occurring speech of sixteen speakers. The participants are stratified based on their level of intimacy, their gender, and their age. Because this clitic is oriented towards a hearer in a conversation, the researchers noted information related to both the speaker and the hearer. This helps in forming a better picture with those questions in mind: Who used this clitic? And who did the speaker use the clitic for?

4.2 *Problem of the study*

Most researchers (e.g., (Al-Raba'a 2022; Haddad, 2018) investigating hearer-oriented clitics have utilized a pragmatic contextual analysis or a generative approach in their studies. Researchers of those studies, therefore, are concerned with finding and analyzing data that helps in describing the phenomenon from a qualitative perspective. However, such studies remain narrow in focus because both studies do not offer a quantitative view for those clitics. Moreover, the data helps only in understanding the phenomenon from scripted or written sources. To highlight, for Haddad (2018: 16), it is enough to support his social-pragmatic approach by eliciting examples from "soap operas, movies, plays, talk shows, and Facebook." It is not clear how (Al-Raba'a 2022: 4) collected his data; however, he framed his analysis by "relying on data from JA [Jordanian Arabic] as well as Classical Arabic."

Together these studies provide important insights into how hearer-oriented clitics function in their context and how they are generated syntactically. Nevertheless, a major drawback of those studies is that they might lead to hasty generalizations. First, "hearer-oriented clitics in JA [Jordanian Arabic] are commonly used in informal situations" […], especially in the rural dialect spoken in Inba, a village that is part of the Northern Al-Mazar District" (Al-Raba'a 2022: 5). It seems that Al-Raba'a's (2022: 16) comment is questionable when it compared to (Haddad's, 2018) claim that "the exclusion of other varieties is informed by the observation that the [attitude datives] in the four varieties of Arabic under examination behave uniformly in terms of their structure, meaning contribution, and social functions."

It is not known till the date of the current investigation the impact of the sociolinguistic factors on the realization of those clitics in spontaneous speech. As mentioned in his response to one of the reviewers of the Italian Journal of Linguistics, Al-Raba'a (2022) clearly points out that there is a chance for a dialectical variation in the use of hearer-oriented clitics. He states this idea as follows.

> It must be noted that a reviewer who is a native speaker of another sub-variety of JA [Jordanian Arabic] has indicated that the hearer-oriented clitics are acceptable in subjunctive, interrogative, and future clauses *in his/her sub-variety, so it appears to be that we are dealing with some dialectal variation here* (emphasis is mine). Crucially for us, though, the arbitrary gap test fully applies to the JA Arabic sub-variety under investigation.
>
> (Al-Raba'a, 2022: 30)

This comment clearly leads us to reject Haddad's (2018: 16) overgeneralization that "attitude datives] in the four varieties of Arabic under examination behave *uniformly* (font style is mine)." Therefore, this research is meant to address this sociolinguistic variational gap in our knowledge of those clitics.

4.3 *Questions of the study*

Research to date has not yet determined answers to the following questions.

1. How common do the hearer-oriented clitics appear in spontaneous speech?
2. What is the impact of sociolinguistic factors, such as age, gender, and the like, on the emergence of hearer-oriented clitics?
3. What are the differences between main regional varieties: Urban and Rural? Does the hearer-oriented clitic appear in one variety but not in others?

4.4 *Population and sampling*

The population of the study consists of Jordanian people living in cities and rural areas. To select the sample of the study, the researchers use the social networks technique. Using this technique helps in building a corpus of natural speeches spoken in natural settings. The sample of the study consists of sixteen individuals, stratified according to age, gender, and region. The age category is viewed in terms of (young vs old). The gender category is based on biological gender (males vs females). We divide region into rural and urban depending on the residential location of the participant. Those participants from Irbid city are classified as urban. On the other hand, participants from the Jordan Valley are categorized as rural.

4.5 *Data collection*

Because hearer-oriented clitics "are used to mark the hearer's involvement or engagement with the at-issue content of an utterance and/or with the speaker as an in-group member" (Haddad, 2020: 10), the researchers designed their interviews in informal setting gatherings. Doing so helps in looking at the interviewer as an in-group member and creates the setting that triggers the use of hearer-oriented clitics in conversations. This method is particularly useful in studying hearer-oriented clitics because defining the type of activity is important to "help social actors [to] determine what types of utterance are appropriate and how an utterance will be understood" (Levinson 1979, cited in Haddad, 2020: 30).

The data was collected by informal interviews with sixteen persons. The interviews lasted for twenty to thirty minutes each. After taking participants' permission to record the interviews, the researchers asked the participants to talk about general topics relating to their dreams, childhood, social media, superstitions, and descriptions of memorable incidents. The aim of selecting those topics is to encourage participants to speak naturally.

To increase the reliability of measures, the researchers met participants in group gatherings along with the presence of family members or close friends. The interviews were recorded using iPhone 16 ProMax, transcribed, and coded to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Prior the recording of the conversations, the researchers informed the participants to sign a consent form in which the researchers clarified the procedures that are followed during the recorded session. All participants were sent the consent form, for three days or more to read the details and know the general purpose of the study. During the session, informants were told that they can stop or pause the recording or interview at any time during the session.

4.6 *Data analysis*

After recording the conversations, the researchers immediately coded the interviews into texts and added symbols and markers to highlight any paralanguage or contextual cues that may help in analyzing the data.

The researchers distinguished hearer-oriented clitics from core-arguments (bound pronouns) following the literature. According to Al-Raba'a (2022) hearer-oriented clitics are distinguished by three features. First, deleting the clitics does not change the meaning of the sentence, and they do not contribute to the truth condition of the sentence. Second, these clitics cannot be categorized as either a beneficiary or a recipient. Third, a unique characteristic that sets hearer-oriented clitics apart from other bound pronouns (subject/object) is that the former cannot be involved in any binding relationship, which is not the case for the latter. The researchers excluded any clitic did not meet those features or that was ambiguous to ensure the clarity of the analysis. See the following examples.[2]

(3)

a. *ʕawwaft-ak*	*ħaalak*
made.exhaust.1.SG-you.M.SG	yourself
'I made you1 exhaust yourself1.'	(Al-Raba'a, 2022: 6)

[2] Based on the variety that Al-raba'a (2020) used in his study.

b. *garraft-ak* *ħaalak*
made.hate.1. SG-you.M.SG yourself
'I made you1 hate yourself1.' (Al-Raba'a, 2022: 6)

(4)
a. **ʕawwaft-lak* *ħaalak*
made.exhaust.1.SG-2.M.SG yourself
'I made-[you1] exhaust yourself1.' (Al-Raba'a, 2022: 6)

b. **garraft-lak* *ħaalak*
made.hate.1.SG-2.M.SG yourself
'I made [you1] hate yourself1.' (Al-Raba'a, 2022: 6)

After that, the researchers used GoldVarb X (Sankoff et al. 2018) for statistical analysis of the language data. The software is used to check the impact of social factors, such as age, gender, and region on the realization of hearer-oriented clitics in the Jordan. The researchers coded the variable and the social factors using symbols. Then, the software counted the data as tokens (200 tokens). Then, the researchers applied two statistical tests: Binomial, Up and Down and Crosstabulation to assess the significance of the social factors on the realization of the variables and to check the relation between those factors. Finally, the researchers tabulated the data and presented the results of the tests.

4.7 *Limitations of the study*

To achieve the goals of this study adequately, the researchers did not cover all the sociolinguistic factors that might contribute to emergence of this clitic. For example, the study does not attempt to analyze the variable frequency of this clitic between scripted and written texts and spontaneous speech. That is, the study does not include written conversations communicated via social media such as Facebook and Whatsapp. Another limitation of this study is that it does not cover all regions in Jordan. However, it is strongly encouraged for future studies to examine the hearer-oriented clitics in the south part of Jordan and compare their results with the outcome of the current study.

5 Findings and discussion

5.1 *Results*

The dataset, in Table 1 below, presents 16 participants (P1–P16) classified by gender, age, region, and their use of the variable [-*ak*] vs [Ø]. A total of 1,329 tokens were recorded in the dataset, with 271 instances of the -*ak* variant (20.4%) and 1,058 instances of the zero (Ø) variant (79.6%). 634 core-arguments (bound pronouns) are excluded. To test whether this difference is statistically significant, a chi-square test was applied. The results show a chi-square value of $\chi^2 = 308.27$, with 1 degree of freedom and a p-value < 0.001 ($p \approx 5.19 \times 10^{-69}$). These numbers indicate that the difference between the two variants is highly significant,

confirming that the zero variant is used much more frequently and is strongly preferred over the *-ak* form across the data.

Table 1: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) across the dataset

Participants	Gender	Age	Region	*-ak*	Ø
P1	M	O	U	9	76
P2	M	O	U	8	80
P3	M	O	R	30	90
P4	M	O	R	29	50
P5	M	Y	U	17	67
P6	M	Y	U	18	46
P7	M	Y	R	35	76
P8	M	Y	R	37	57
P9	F	O	U	4	88
P10	F	O	U	5	90
P11	F	O	R	12	67
P12	F	O	R	15	86
P13	F	Y	U	7	95
P14	F	Y	U	9	84
P15	F	Y	R	19	50
P16	F	Y	R	17	66

Thus, across age, gender, and region, the zero variant dominates in frequency, showing that speakers overwhelmingly prefer Ø over *-ak* in their speech. Let us now examine these categories more closely. By looking at gender (Table 2), age (Table 3), and region (Table 4) separately, clearer patterns of variation emerge. This breakdown highlights how each social factor plays a role in shaping the distribution and preference between the *-ak* and Ø variants.

Table 2: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) across gender

Gender	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
F	88.0	626.0	714.0	12.3	87.7
M	183.0	542.0	725.0	25.2	74.8

Table 3: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) across age

Age	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
O	112.0	627.0	739.0	15.2	84.8
Y	159.0	541.0	700.0	22.7	77.3

Table 4: Distribution of the variable (-ak vs. Ø) across region

Region	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
R	194.0	542.0	736.0	26.4	73.6
U	77.0	626.0	703.0	11.0	89.0

The chi-square test revealed a significant difference in variant use by gender ($\chi^2 = 38.42$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$). Males show a higher tendency to use the *-ak* form (25.2%) compared to females (12.3%). In contrast, females overwhelmingly prefer the zero variant (87.7%). This demonstrates that gender strongly influences the choice of variant. In addition, age also shows a significant effect ($\chi^2 = 12.95$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$). Younger speakers use the *-ak* variant more frequently (22.7%) compared to older speakers (15.2%). While the zero variant remains dominant in both groups, younger participants are noticeably more inclined to retain the *-ak* form. Region emerges as the strongest factor, with a highly significant result ($\chi^2 = 54.82$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, rural speakers use the *-ak* form far more often (26.4%) than urban speakers (11.0%). Urban speakers show a very strong preference for the zero variant (89.0%). Therefore, while rural speakers, although still favoring zero overall, maintain the *-ak* form to a greater extent.

Table 5: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) cross tabulating age and gender

Age	Gender	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
O	F	36	331	367	9.8	90.2
O	M	76	296	372	20.4	79.6
Y	F	52	295	347	15.0	85.0
Y	M	107	246	353	30.3	69.7

The chi-square test yielded $\chi^2(3) = 13.80$, $p = 0.003$. This indicates a statistically significant relationship between age and gender in the distribution of the two variants. Young males show the highest relative use of *-ak* (30.3%), while old females favor the zero variant (90.2%). Thus, age and gender together strongly influence variant choices.

Table 6: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) cross tabulating age and region

Age	Region	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
O	R	86	293	379	22.7	77.3
O	U	26	334	360	7.2	92.8
Y	R	108	249	357	30.3	69.7
Y	U	51	292	343	14.9	85.1

The chi-square test gave $\chi^2(3) = 15.96$, $p = 0.001$. The relationship between age and region is significant, with rural young speakers showing the strongest preference for *-ak* (30.3%), while urban old speakers overwhelmingly prefer the zero variant (92.8%). This suggests that both social factors jointly constrain variant selection.

Table 7: Distribution of the variable (*-ak* vs. Ø) cross tabulating gender and region

Gender	Region	*-ak*	Ø	Total	*-ak* %	Ø %
F	R	63	269	332	19.0	81.0
F	U	25	357	382	6.5	93.5
M	R	131	273	404	32.4	67.6
M	U	52	269	321	16.2	83.8

The chi-square test produced $\chi^2(3) = 45.62$, $p < 0.0001$. This is highly significant, showing a strong association between gender and region. Rural males are the heaviest users of *-ak* (32.4%), while urban females are the most consistent users of the zero variant (93.5%). The findings highlight that male speakers in rural areas maintain traditional forms, whereas urban females shift toward innovative or prestige forms.

5.2 *Discussion*

The results of this study reveal a clear quantitative preference for the zero (Ø) variant over the *-ak* form, suggesting that speakers overwhelmingly favor the unmarked option in everyday speech. With almost four times as many instances of Ø compared to *-ak*, this distribution is not random but highly significant, as confirmed by the chi-square test. From a sociolinguistic standpoint, such a strong bias indicates that zero form has acquired the status of the socially unmarked or default variant in the community. Following Labov's (2001) framework of linguistic change, when a variant becomes overwhelmingly dominant, it often reflects either a completed change or an ongoing process of standardization (Abdel-Jawad 1981; Al-Deaibes et al. 2021; Habib 2014; Ibrahim, 2009). In this sense, the high frequency of Ø could be interpreted as evidence of linguistic leveling and the gradual retreat of –ak from colloquial use. This confirms Al-Raba'a's (2022) view where *-ak* is not dominant.

The predominance of the zero variant may also reflect broader social meanings attached to standardization and prestige (Abdel-Jawad 1981). In many Arabic-speaking contexts, forms associated with urban or educated speech are perceived as more prestigious, while older or rural variants tend to be marked as traditional or localized (Abdelhady 2019). The preference for Ø, therefore, may not only be phonological simplification but also a social alignment with norms of education, modernity, and upward mobility. Speakers often evaluate linguistic forms in terms of symbolic capital, where language choice indexes social aspirations and belonging (Aditya et al. 2025; Amjad 2025; Kjällström 2025; Muxtulova & Tasheva 2025; Zschomler 2019). In this case, the high proportion of zero forms could be understood as the community's shift toward a prestige norm, consciously or unconsciously aligning with the urban standard (Abdelhady 2019; Abdel-Jawad, 1981).

Gender differences in variant use support this interpretation (Al-Harahsheh 2014). The data show that men employ the –ak form approximately twice as often as women. This pattern resonates strongly with the classic findings of sociolinguistic research: women tend to use more standard or prestigious forms, while men often favor vernacular or nonstandard variants (Trudgill 1972; Romaine 2003). Women's linguistic behavior has frequently been interpreted

as reflecting greater social awareness and sensitivity to overt prestige norms (Brouwer 2011; Eckert 1989; Kjällström 2025; Kulick 2003; Lakoff 2003; Livia 2003; Romaine 2003; Wodak & Benke 2017). As Trudgill (1972) observed in his study of Norwich English, women's preference for standard forms often reflects a desire to project status and respectability in societies where language use can carry symbolic value (Trudgill 1972). Similarly, in Arabic-speaking societies, female speakers may be more attuned to social judgments associated with language, favoring variants that connote refinement or education. Men, on the other hand, may preserve older or localized forms such as, *-ak* because this carry covert prestige, forms that, while stigmatized in formal contexts, signal solidarity, toughness, or authenticity within male peer networks (Labov 2001; Holmes 2013). The strong gendered contrast in this dataset thus aligns well with long-standing observations that linguistic variation is deeply tied to gendered identity performances rather than biological sex differences.

Age also appears to exert a significant influence on the realization of the variable, but the direction of the effect is particularly interesting (Eckert 2017). Contrary to expectations in apparent-time studies, younger speakers in this sample use *-ak* slightly more frequently than older speakers. In most cases of linguistic change in progress, younger generations tend to lead the shift toward innovative or prestige forms (Eckert 2017). However, in this case, the younger cohort's slightly higher use of *-ak* may suggest the opposite: rather than abandoning the traditional form, they may be re-appropriating it as a stylistic resource. Such reversal is not uncommon in sociolinguistic change; younger speakers sometimes revitalize older features to express local identity, irony, or resistance to urban or institutional norms. The finding could therefore point to the emergence of a new social meaning for *-ak*, especially among young males, who appear to use it as a symbolic marker of masculinity or authenticity. The age–gender interaction supports this interpretation, with young men being the most frequent users of *-ak* and older women the least. This suggests that the form's survival may depend not on structural necessity but on its social indexicality, its power to convey identity and stance in interaction (Silverstein 2003).

Region emerges as the most powerful conditioning factor, as evidenced by the highest chi-square value. Rural speakers use –ak more than twice as often as their urban counterparts, revealing a classic urban–rural linguistic divide. Sociolinguistic research consistently shows that rural communities tend to retain older or conservative linguistic features, partly because of denser social networks and slower exposure to normative pressures from education and media (Milroy & Milroy 1992). By contrast, urban speakers are more susceptible to standardization and language contact, accelerating the adoption of prestige or innovative forms. The present results fit this model precisely: the zero variant dominates in urban contexts (nearly 89 %), indicating convergence toward an urban-based standard, while rural speakers maintain a stronger attachment to *-ak* (26 %), preserving it as part of local linguistic identity. Such distribution echoes findings from studies of Arabic dialect leveling, where rural forms gradually recede as speakers align with urban norms in the pursuit of social mobility (Abdel-Jawad 1981; Aditya et al. 2025; Al-Wer & de Jong 2017; Habib 2014). Nonetheless, the persistence of –ak among rural participants demonstrates that local identity remains an important sociolinguistic force, even within broader processes of change.

The interaction between gender and region further reinforces the significance of social meaning in variation. Rural males are the heaviest users of *-ak*, whereas urban females are the most consistent users of the zero variant. This polarization exemplifies the interplay between overt and covert prestige. In Trudgill's (1972) model, overt prestige corresponds to the social value of standard forms, while covert prestige is associated with nonstandard forms that carry

positive in-group value. For rural men, *-ak* may symbolize solidarity, local pride, and authenticity; for urban women, Ø indexes modernity, education, and sophistication. Such complementary distributions are rarely accidental; they reflect stable social meanings attached to language that reinforce group identities. These patterns also illustrate the principle that language variation operates as a semiotic system through which speakers perform belonging and differentiation. The *-ak*/Ø alternation therefore transcends phonological or morphological difference; it operates as a social index through which speakers negotiate local and supra-local identities.

The consistent statistical significance of all three factors – gender, age, and region – and their interactions indicates that the variation is socially structured rather than random. The evidence suggests that language change and social differentiation are intertwined processes: linguistic forms do not merely reflect social divisions but help construct them. Speakers use variants not only because of social position but to actively signal stance, affiliation, and ideology. The recurrent pattern of urban females leading the adoption of the prestige form and rural males preserving the conservative one reflects the gender paradox described by Labov (1990): women lead changes from above (toward prestige forms), while men often lead changes from below or maintain vernacular norms. Your results correspond closely to this paradox, illustrating how universal sociolinguistic tendencies manifest within specific Arabic dialectal contexts.

Interpreting these findings within the theory of indexical order (Silverstein 2003), the *-ak* form may have shifted from a first-order index of grammatical possession to a second-order index of social identity. That is, its linguistic function is now intertwined with social meaning: using *-ak* is not simply grammatical but socially meaningful, indexing rurality, masculinity, and perhaps conservatism. Conversely, using the zero variant signals education, urbanity, and social mobility. Such indexical layering explains why both forms persist even under strong asymmetry in frequency; speakers maintain them because they carry contrasting social meanings that remain useful in different contexts. This semiotic social dimension aligns with recent studies in Arabic sociolinguistics that highlight how morphological alternations can embody identity negotiations and ideologies of modernity versus tradition.

The data portray a community undergoing gradual linguistic change, where the zero variant is becoming dominant through standardization and prestige pressure, while *-ak* survives as a socially meaningful relic of traditional identity. The chi-square results provide quantitative support for the structured nature of this variation: gender, age, and region all interact to produce a complex sociolinguistic pattern consistent with universal principles of language change. The dominance of Ø demonstrates convergence toward a supra-local norm, yet the persistence of *-ak* among rural and male speakers illustrates the resilience of local forms as markers of authenticity and solidarity. These findings thus reaffirm the core sociolinguistic insight that language variation is not arbitrary but socially motivated, reflecting the dynamic balance between prestige and identity, innovation and continuity, standardization and diversity (Labov 2001; Holmes 2013).

6 Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive sociolinguistic examination of hearer-oriented clitics in Jordanian Arabic, particularly the alternation between the *-ak* and zero (Ø) variants. By integrating quantitative analysis with theoretical insights from variational pragmatics, the

findings reveal that the use of hearer-oriented clitics is systematically constrained by gender, age, and region, rather than being an arbitrary feature of informal discourse. The results demonstrate that the zero variant (Ø) overwhelmingly dominates in frequency and functions as the socially unmarked or prestige form, reflecting broader processes of linguistic leveling and standardization within Jordanian Arabic. Conversely, the *-ak* form remains a salient index of rurality, masculinity, and local identity, illustrating the persistence of conservative linguistic features as markers of authenticity and solidarity.

The study also reinforces long-established sociolinguistic patterns: women, particularly those in urban environments, tend to favor prestige and innovative variants, while men and rural speakers retain vernacular or conservative forms associated with covert prestige. These patterns underscore the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and social meaning, confirming that linguistic variation operates as both a reflection of and a mechanism for constructing social differentiation. Furthermore, the results highlight how younger speakers, especially young males, may re-appropriate older features like *-ak* as stylistic resources, thereby maintaining their social relevance within contemporary discourse. This research bridges an empirical gap in previous pragmatic and generative studies by offering quantitative evidence of sociolinguistic conditioning in hearer-oriented clitics. It underscores that such clitics are not merely grammatical artifacts but socially embedded markers of interactional stance and identity negotiation.

Future research should extend this investigation to other parts of Jordan and digital communication contexts to determine whether these patterns persist across written discourse and broader regional varieties. In doing so, further insights can be gained into how Arabic speakers continually balance linguistic innovation and tradition in shaping their sociolinguistic realities.

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Data availability

The author has reported the outcome of the interviews in this manuscript.

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