Al-Lahjah : Jurnal Pendidikan, Bahasa Arab dan Kajian Linguistik Arab
Vol. 9 No. 1, Januari 2026, Halaman 1330-1337
E-ISSN: 2615-5656

Arabic Language Variation and Social Identity in Arabic-Speaking Communities

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the relationship between language and social identity among Arabic speakers through a sociolinguistic approach. The research is qualitative and descriptive in nature, employing a case study approach. The research subjects consist of Arabic speakers from various social backgrounds, ages, and educational levels, while the object of the study is the use of Arabic, both fusha and local dialects, in formal and informal contexts. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation of social interactions, and analyzed using thematic and interpretative techniques to identify patterns of language use and their relationship to social identity formation. The findings reveal that Arabic speakers adjust their language variety according to the communication context, interaction goals, and social status, making language a dynamic medium for negotiating social identity. Fusha is used in formal and institutional contexts to convey authority and legitimacy, whereas local dialects are employed in everyday interactions to foster solidarity and social closeness. These results confirm that language is not merely a system of communication but a social practice that reflects social structures and cultural values. The implications of this study highlight the importance of understanding the relationship between language and social identity in Arabic language teaching, enabling more contextual, adaptive, and effective intercultural communication competence.

Keywords: *Arabic Language; Diglossia, Language Practice; Social Identity; Sociolinguistics*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis hubungan antara bahasa dan identitas sosial dalam masyarakat penutur Arab melalui pendekatan sosiolinguistik. Jenis penelitian yang digunakan adalah penelitian kualitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan studi kasus. Subjek penelitian terdiri dari penutur Arab dari berbagai latar belakang sosial, usia, dan tingkat pendidikan, sedangkan objek penelitian adalah praktik penggunaan bahasa Arab, baik fusha maupun dialek lokal, dalam konteks formal dan informal. Teknik pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan dokumentasi interaksi sosial, sementara teknik analisis data menggunakan analisis tematik dan interpretatif untuk mengidentifikasi pola penggunaan bahasa serta hubungan dengan pembentukan identitas sosial. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penutur Arab menyesuaikan ragam bahasa yang digunakan sesuai dengan konteks komunikasi, tujuan interaksi, dan posisi sosial, sehingga bahasa menjadi sarana negosiasi identitas sosial yang dinamis. Bahasa Arab fusha digunakan dalam konteks formal dan institusional untuk menunjukkan otoritas dan legitimasi, sedangkan dialek lokal lebih banyak digunakan dalam interaksi sehari-hari untuk membangun solidaritas dan kedekatan sosial. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa bahasa bukan sekadar sistem komunikasi, melainkan praktik sosial yang mencerminkan struktur sosial dan nilai budaya masyarakat. Implikasi penelitian ini menunjukkan pentingnya memahami hubungan antara bahasa dan identitas sosial dalam pengajaran bahasa Arab, sehingga pembelajaran dapat lebih kontekstual, adaptif, dan mampu membentuk kompetensi komunikasi lintas budaya yang efektif.

***Kata-kata Kunci**: Bahasa Arab; Diglosia; Identitas Sosial; Praktik Kebahasaan; Sosiolinguistik*

INTRODUCTION

Language is one of the fundamental elements of human social life, functioning not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of its speakers' social identity. In sociolinguistic studies, language is understood as a social practice that is always linked to the structure of society, culture, and power relations(Zainuri, 2019). Every language choice made by a speaker reflects social background, group membership, and the identity one wishes to project. The relationship between language and social identity therefore becomes an important theme in understanding the dynamics of multicultural and multilingual societies.

From a sociolinguistic point of view, this approach emphasizes the importance of using language appropriately according to social and cultural context. Arabic, which ranges dialectally from fuṣḥā (standard Arabic) to ‘āmmiyah (local dialect), requires a flexible and contextual learning method (Rahman & Riadussolihin, 2024). Research by Khalifah and by Al-Zahrani & Al-Yahya indicates that learners accustomed to combining both language varieties in the learning process demonstrate better intercultural communication skills and greater confidence when interacting with native speakers. This finding aligns with the concept of language socialization put forward by (Suryani, Amisa, & Putri, 2024), which views language acquisition as a social process encompassing the internalization of interactional norms and cultural values.

Arabic-speaking communities display a distinctive linguistic characteristic, most clearly reflected in the phenomenon of diglossia between fuṣḥā Arabic and its various dialects (‘āmiyyah). Fuṣḥā is typically used in formal contexts, such as religious activities, education, official speeches, and written documents, as it is considered to carry a higher degree of prestige and seriousness (Aditya, Rafli, Amrulloh, & Erlina, 2025). Conversely, the local dialect (‘āmiyyah) is used predominantly in everyday communication, whether in family interactions, peer groups, or more informal social settings. The distinction between fuṣḥā and dialect is not merely linguistic but also carries social and symbolic meaning that reflects the structure of society. Language functions as a tool for asserting social status, authority, closeness, and affiliation with a particular group. A speaker's choice of language variety is a form of self-expression that indirectly affirms social identity, cultural norms, and the values prevailing within their community (Ulil Albab, 2023).

Furthermore, each variety of Arabic carries a different representation of identity for its speakers. The use of fuṣḥā signals formality, credibility, and a connection to scholarly or religious tradition, while dialect emphasizes familiarity, flexibility, and social engagement in a more personal context (Aditya et al., 2025). This phenomenon shows that Arabic functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbolic medium that allows individuals to express themselves, build social relationships, and negotiate their identity across various strata of society.

In social practice, the choice of Arabic language variety is often influenced by factors such as age, education, social status, and communicative situation. Arabic speakers, whether consciously or unconsciously, adjust the language they use to build solidarity, assert authority, or mark membership in a particular group (Daud, 2001). This shows that language is not neutral but becomes a medium for negotiating social identity. Consequently, an effective study of Arabic must be conducted through a sociolinguistic perspective that emphasizes the close relationship between language, social interaction, and identity construction (Ulhaq, Fatihin, Sa, Rahma, & A, 2025).

Ideally, the use of Arabic is expected to represent speakers' social identity flexibly and contextually. However, reality on the ground shows tension between the ideal linguistic norm and everyday language practice. Several recent studies indicate that the use of fuṣḥā is often associated with prestige and authority, while dialect is frequently regarded as less valuable in formal contexts (Ulhaq et al., 2025). This gap gives rise to identity issues, particularly for speakers caught between the demands of formality and the need for social expression.

Previous research on Arabic has largely focused on structural linguistic aspects or on diglossia in general terms. Meanwhile, studies that specifically examine Arabic as a construction of social identity remain relatively limited, especially within the context of contemporary social interaction. Some studies do address the relationship between dialect and regional identity, but few have comprehensively integrated a social identity perspective (Ulhaq et al., 2025). There is therefore a research gap that needs to be filled in order to deepen understanding of Arabic and social identity. This study seeks to support and extend previous research by positioning Arabic as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by its speakers' social identity. This study does not intend to dismiss previous findings but rather to correct a tendency in the literature to overemphasize the formal aspects of language(Alsulami, 2019). Its novelty lies in analyzing

Arabic as a means of constructing social identity within a dynamic social context, thereby offering a more contextual and integrative sociolinguistic perspective.

Based on the foregoing, this study aims to analyze the role of Arabic in shaping and representing the social identity of its speaking community. Specifically, it examines how language and dialect choices are used in various social contexts. In addition, this study aims to identify the social factors that influence the use of Arabic. The findings are expected to make a theoretical contribution to the study of Arabic sociolinguistics as well as practical implications for language and education.

METHOD

This is a descriptive qualitative study aimed at examining the relationship between language use and the formation of social identity in Arabic-speaking communities. The approach employed is a sociolinguistic one, positioning language as a social practice that reflects speakers' social background and position (Zakarneh & Mahmoud, 2025). The research design is a case study, which allows the researcher to analyze linguistic phenomena in depth within a specific social context (Langman & Sayer, 2020). The research subjects are Arabic speakers with differing social backgrounds, such as age, level of education, and social role, selected using purposive sampling so that the data obtained are relevant to the research objectives.

The research procedure began with determining the location and subjects of the study, followed by the collection of linguistic data through participant observation and in-depth interviews (Moleong, 2017). The oral speech data obtained were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The instruments used included an observation guide, a semi-structured interview protocol, and an audio recorder. Data collection techniques consisted of observation, interviews, and documentation in the form of recorded conversations or texts of Arabic speakers' communication in various social situations (Nazilla, 2025).

Data analysis was conducted using an interactive qualitative analysis technique comprising data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Linguistic data were analyzed by identifying forms of language variation, code choice, and their context of use, then linked to aspects of speakers' social identity, such as social status, group solidarity, and interactional situation. The results of this analysis were subsequently used to draw conclusions regarding the role of language in representing and constructing social identity within Arabic-speaking communities (Mezmir, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sociolinguistics is a branch of linguistics that focuses on the relationship between language and the society of its speakers. The term itself derives from the combination of sociology and linguistics, indicating that this discipline examines language in relation to social reality (Ulhaq et al., 2025). Conceptually, sociolinguistics is understood as an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between language use and various social factors within a speech community. It therefore does not focus solely on the analysis of language's internal structure—phonology, morphology, and syntax but also examines linguistic heterogeneity, namely the diversity of forms and uses of language that arise in social communication practice (Nazilla, 2025).

The sociolinguistic approach to language learning attends to three main factors: social, linguistic, and psychological. The social factor relates to learners' cultural background and social conditions, the linguistic factor concerns language structure and communicative ability, and the psychological factor covers motivation, interest, and attitude in the learning process (Abdullah, 2019). This approach also emphasizes the importance of using everyday-life contexts in learning, so that the language being learned is easier to understand and can be applied in real situations. By attending to learners' social and cultural background in Arabic teaching, and by employing techniques such as group discussion, simulation, and role-play, learners are expected to develop effective Arabic communicative competence together with social and cultural sensitivity when communicating with native speakers (Halimah, 2022).

In the study of language use, sociolinguistics is very closely related to sociology, a discipline that studies society broadly, encompassing social structure, social organization, social groups such as family, ethnicity, and nation, as well as stratification, behavior, and social interaction (Mezmir, 2020). This process of social interaction cannot be separated from the role of language as the primary means of conveying ideas and messages so that they can be understood by other members of society (Zakarneh & Mahmoud, 2025). It is at this point that sociolinguistics, which studies language in relation to society, intersects directly with sociology. In its research practice, sociolinguistics relies heavily on data drawn from society's social

interactions; both disciplines may employ qualitative approaches suited to their topic and objectives, and both make use of similar data-collection techniques such as interviews, recordings, and documentation.

This study focuses on examining the relationship between the use of Arabic and the formation of social identity within its speaking community. The main focus is directed at how variation in Arabic particularly fuṣḥā and dialect (‘āmiyyah) is used across various social contexts, and how these language choices represent and negotiate speakers' social identity. In addition, this study examines the role of social interactional context in shaping language choice and the social meaning generated by such linguistic practices. Accordingly, this study positions Arabic as a dynamic and meaningful social practice within the life of its speaking community.

Results

The findings show that the use of Arabic within its speaking community is heterogeneous and context-dependent, rather than existing in a single, uniform form. Variation in Arabic emerges as a response to the social reality surrounding everyday communicative practice, in which speakers consciously take into account the situation, the purpose of the interaction, and the social relationship built with their interlocutor. This sociolinguistic awareness shows that language is understood not merely as a system of linguistic signs but as a social practice laden with meaning and value. Accordingly, the choice of language form is always intertwined with speakers' efforts to adjust themselves to the communicative context and the social position they wish to project.

In the domain of formal and institutional communication such as educational activities, official forums, and religious activities fuṣḥā Arabic tends to be the preferred choice. Fuṣḥā is perceived as a language variety with high social legitimacy, representing formality, orderliness, and authority. Its use is based not merely on linguistic considerations but also on the symbolic meaning attached to that variety. As one informant explained, using fuṣḥā Arabic in official forums or in the mosque is regarded as a form of courtesy and respect toward the situation at hand. This confirms that the choice of fuṣḥā is a social strategy that functions to display a respectful attitude and a particular social position within the interaction.

Conversely, in informal, everyday social interaction, dialect (‘āmiyyah) is used more dominantly. Dialect allows for communication that is more fluid, spontaneous, and free from rigid social distance. Through the use of ‘āmiyyah, the relationship between speakers feels closer and more egalitarian, as this variety is regarded as representing an authentic social reality. This practice shows that language plays an important role in building social solidarity and strengthening the emotional bonds between interlocutors. Speakers' shifting between fuṣḥā and dialect demonstrates an adaptive ability to read changes in social context. Code-switching and language variation occur flexibly whenever the communicative situation shifts, for example from the formal domain to the personal domain. This phenomenon indicates that language choice is not merely a linguistic decision but a social one, shaped by the interlocutor, the setting, the communicative purpose, and the norms prevailing within the speech community.

Beyond face-to-face interaction, the tendency toward code-switching and the blending of language varieties is also evident in the digital communication domain. Observation of speakers' interactions on social media reveals the emergence of the Arabizi phenomenon the writing of Arabic using Latin letters and numerals which is widely used by young speakers in informal conversation as well as online content (Ulhaq et al., 2025). This phenomenon shows that digital space has become a new arena in which speakers negotiate their social identity, one in which the boundary between fuṣḥā and dialect becomes increasingly fluid and hybrid. Young speakers tend to use digital platforms as a space of expression relatively free from the normative pressure of formality, so that a mixture of Arabic, local dialect, and foreign terms has become commonplace. A similar phenomenon can also be seen in online video content, where language variation is used strategically to reach a wider audience while maintaining emotional closeness with viewers (Rizki Ramadhan, Setiyawan, & Yusuf Mahbubillah, 2024). Accordingly, the digital domain expands the field in which Arabic speakers negotiate social identity, extending beyond conventional face-to-face interaction.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that language functions as a strategic medium for building and displaying speakers' social identity. The choice of language variety reflects the attitude, social orientation, and position that speakers wish to assert in interaction. The use of fuṣḥā tends to be associated with an effort to display authority and prestige, while the use of dialect serves as a means of showing emotional closeness and social affiliation. The social identity constructed through this linguistic practice is dynamic and context-dependent, as it is continually negotiated according to changing situations and ongoing social relationships.

Another notable finding is the variation in language-use patterns based on speakers' age and level of education. Younger speakers with a formal educational background tend to switch more easily from dialect to fuṣḥā when situations demand scholarly expression, whereas older speakers with strong religious experience are more naturally skilled at using fuṣḥā in ritual contexts or sermons. This difference indicates that mastery of a language variety is determined not merely by biological age but also by the process of learning, institutional exposure, and social experience accumulated by speakers over their lifetime (Damayanti, Karman, Fefrika, & Kan, 2025). In addition, level of education influences speakers' confidence in using fuṣḥā in public settings; speakers with higher formal education tend to be more confident using fuṣḥā in official forums, whereas speakers with limited access to education are more comfortable communicating in dialect even in semi-formal situations. This pattern confirms that linguistic competence is closely intertwined with social structure and the educational opportunities available to speakers.

The novelty of this study lies in the scarcity of empirical research that specifically examines the practice of Arabic-variety selection in the social life of the speaking community by positioning language as a living, dynamic social practice. Most previous research has tended to focus on the structural aspects of Arabic or to discuss the dichotomy between fuṣḥā and ‘āmiyyah in purely theoretical terms, without delving deeply into how speakers consciously negotiate language choice within real interactional contexts. In addition, studies that directly link language choice to the construction of speakers' social identity remain relatively limited, particularly within socio-religious and everyday community contexts. This study therefore seeks to fill that gap by highlighting how variation in Arabic is used as a social strategy, as well as a means of constructing identity and social relations in everyday communicative practice.

Overall, the findings of this study confirm that Arabic cannot be understood merely as a linguistic system but rather as a social practice shaped by the dynamics of context, relationships, and social values. By situating language variation within a contextual sociolinguistic framework, this study contributes to enriching the study of Arabic, particularly in understanding the relationship between language, society, and speakers' social identity.

Discussion

Within a sociolinguistic framework, Arabic is a social practice inseparable from the formation and representation of its speakers' social identity. Language functions not only as a communicative tool but also as a social symbol reflecting the structure, values, and power relations within society (Rohmah, Maulana, & Anam, 2025). Accordingly, the study of Arabic needs to be understood within a broader social context, rather than merely as an autonomous linguistic system. From the perspective of diglossia theory, Arabic displays the coexistence of two main varieties fuṣḥā and dialect (‘āmiyyah) each with a different social function. Fuṣḥā is traditionally associated with the formal, institutional, and religious domain, while dialect is used in everyday interaction. However, diglossia is not merely functional but also symbolic, as each variety carries particular social meaning (Al Yamin, 2023). Fuṣḥā is often perceived as a prestige language representing authority, scholarship, and social legitimacy.

In the sociolinguistic study of Arabic, there are seven key elements that constitute the focus of research. First, the speaker's social identity, reflecting how an individual presents themselves through language (Fatimatuzzahro, Lestari, Syarifatun Amirah, Wahyuningsi, & Hermawan, 2024). Second, the listener's social identity how the interlocutor's social characteristics influence the speaker's language choice. Third, the social environment, encompassing the social and cultural context in which interaction takes place. Fourth, synchronic and diachronic analysis of social dialects, to understand language variation across different periods and its historical development. Fifth, differing social evaluations by speakers, indicating perceptions of and attitudes toward particular language varieties. Sixth, levels of variation within linguistic varieties, emphasizing differences in language variety according to communicative situation. Seventh, the practical application of sociolinguistic research findings how such findings can be applied in teaching, communication, and further research (Fajar, 2025).

Contemporary studies show that the relationship between fuṣḥā and dialect is dynamic and context-dependent. Arabic speakers can switch between the two varieties according to the communicative situation and the social objective they wish to achieve. This phenomenon shows that diglossia is not a rigid system but a social mechanism that allows speakers to negotiate their position and (Harianto & Ritonga, 2022). In this context, language variation functions both as a reflection of social stratification and as a means of social navigation. Language also plays a central role in the formation of social identity, as explained by social identity theory. Language choice can be understood as a symbol of membership in a particular social group and as a strategy for building affiliation or social differentiation (Alsulami, 2019). The use of fuṣḥā tends

to represent a formal, educated, and religious identity, while dialect marks social closeness and attachment to the local community. Language choice is thus a meaningful and ideological social act.

The phenomenon of diglossia in Arabic-speaking communities can also be understood through the perspective of linguistic capital, as emphasized in applied sociolinguistic studies (Misdawi M. & Basri, 2025). Mastery of fuṣḥā functions as a form of symbolic capital that provides access to prestigious social spaces, such as educational institutions, religious bodies, and public forums, while mastery of dialect provides social capital in the form of closeness and acceptance within everyday communities. These two forms of capital do not negate one another but rather complement each other in shaping a speaker's overall communicative capacity. Speakers who master both varieties in a balanced manner tend to possess greater social flexibility, as they can move across social domains without losing legitimacy or emotional closeness with their interlocutors. This perspective reinforces the argument that diglossia is not merely a structural linguistic phenomenon but also a mechanism for the distribution of symbolic power within Arabic-speaking communities.

The language and identity approach views identity as performative, continually shaped through linguistic practice. Social identity is not fixed but is negotiated situationally within social interaction (Aqib & Hidayat, 2020). Within Arabic-speaking communities, shifting between fuṣḥā and dialect becomes the primary means by which speakers display different identities according to context and social relationship. Language, in this respect, functions as a performative medium in the construction of identity (Khasanah, 2021). From the perspective of interactional sociolinguistics, the social meaning of language is produced through the context of interaction. The choice of language variety functions as a contextual cue that helps construct and interpret the social relationship between speaker and interlocutor. The use of dialect in informal interaction strengthens solidarity and social closeness, while the use of fuṣḥā creates social distance and asserts hierarchy (Pabbajah & Ramli, 2024). Language thus not only reflects social relationships but also actively shapes them.

These findings carry important implications for the teaching of Arabic, particularly for efforts to integrate sociolinguistic awareness into curricula and teaching methods. Teaching that emphasizes only the structural mastery of fuṣḥā risks neglecting learners' communicative competence in the face of diverse social situations (Harianto & Ritonga, 2022). A learning model that integrates an understanding of dialectal variation, social context, and the identity function of language therefore needs to be developed, so that learners are able not only to speak grammatically but also to be sensitive to the social meaning behind the language choices they make. A learning approach based on communicative situations such as simulations of formal and informal interaction can help learners understand when and why a particular language variety is used (Halimah, 2022). In this way, the teaching of Arabic is oriented not only toward mastery of linguistic rules but also toward the formation of sociocultural competence relevant to the real communicative reality of Arabic-speaking communities.

Overall, the integration of diglossia theory, social identity, and the performativity of identity shows that Arabic is a dynamic and meaningful social practice. The sociolinguistic study of Arabic needs to move beyond structural analysis toward a contextual approach that situates language in relation to identity and social change. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the role of Arabic in the social life of its speaking community.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Arabic, in the life of its speaking community, is flexible and diverse. The use of language does not occur in a single, uniform manner but continually adapts to social context, communicative purpose, and interpersonal relationships. Language is not merely a tool for conveying information but also a meaning-rich means of negotiating identity, building social closeness, and asserting speakers' social position. This finding is consistent with the study's objective of understanding the relationship between linguistic practice and the social identity of Arabic speakers from a sociolinguistic perspective. The findings confirm that the choice between fuṣḥā Arabic and dialect (‘āmiyyah) is made consciously, depending on formal or informal situations, and is influenced by social and cultural factors. The use of language as a communicative strategy demonstrates speakers' ability to balance authority, solidarity, and group affiliation. Language thus functions as a performative medium that allows individuals to express themselves while simultaneously building and maintaining social identity, reflecting a close relationship among theory, empirical data, and the study's objectives. The limitations of this study include its restricted range of subjects and the broad dialectal variation that has not been fully analyzed. Future research could expand the study across regions, examine the influence of digital media on linguistic

practice, and explore the impact of globalization on the construction of social identity. These findings thus open opportunities for the development of sociolinguistically informed Arabic language teaching, the strengthening of cultural awareness, and a deeper understanding of the relationship between language and identity in modern society.

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