

From *Rajjal* to *Rayyal* : Dialect Change among Young Qatari Bedouin Women



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This study aimed to explore something subtle yet deeply significant—and seldom documented: “How young Bedouin women in Qatar are reshaping their linguistic practices as they establish new social identities through increased interaction with Hadhari communities and other expatriates in schools, universities, and workplaces.”

Social and Linguistic Fabric of Qatar

The Qatari population primarily consists of two major groups: the Hadhar, a sedentary population traditionally engaged in occupations such as fishing and pearl diving, and the Bedouins, who lived in the desert, with their primary occupation involving the raising of camels and sheep. Since the exploration of oil in the 20th century, which unleashed projects of modernization and urbanization on

a massive scale, the lifestyles of both groups have dramatically changed. The Hadhar and Bedouins are no longer engaged in their traditional occupations, nor do they live in isolation from one another. Today’s Qataris live in modern houses, drive the latest cars, and work with each other and other Arab and non-Arab expats in modern offices. Their respective Arabic dialects, however, still show distinct features, the most prominent of which is



that the Standard Arabic letter jeem in words such as rajjaal, meaning ‘man’, is pronounced as rayyaal by the Hadharis and rajjaal by the Bedouins.

Why Dialect Matters

Arabic in Qatar, as in the rest of the Arab World, is not just one language. Alongside Standard Arabic, which is used in the official spoken and written communication in government offices, schools, and universities, and the religious discourses, there are local varieties tied to heritage and tribal origins. Qataris, while using Standard Arabic in formal contexts, take pride in speaking their respective dialects in everyday social interactions to express identity and build relationships. Though closely related, these dialects differ in subtle but recognizably distinct ways.

In addition to the differences in the pronunciation of rajjaal and rayyal, there are many other key words and expressions that mark the Hadhar apart from Bedouins. When addressing a woman, for example, Bedouins would use the phrase ismish/ismis ‘your name’, while Hadharis would pronounce it as ismitch, changing the last sound to ‘ch’ as in the English word ‘chat’. The word for ‘I want’ is pronounced as abghi (with a throaty sound for ‘gh’) by Bedouins, but abbi by the Hadhars. Such differences quietly signal who they are and where they belong or where they would like to belong. For decades, Qataris moved between these social spaces with little mixing. However, urbanization and education have created social and linguistic

spaces for sustained and meaningful language contact between them. As linguists, we wanted to understand: Are younger Bedouins holding on to their traditional forms of speech, or are they sounding more like their Hadhari classmates and co-workers?

How the Change was Studied

Two kinds of linguistic evidence were combined: natural speech and attitudinal survey data. First, informal interviews were recorded with eight Qataris—older and younger, men and women—all of Bedouin ancestry. The conversations were loosely structured and open-ended, covering childhood, schooling, and daily life, followed by questions about attitudes towards different ways of speaking.

Second, a survey was conducted with sixty Qatari university students—Bedouin, Hadhari, and those of mixed heritage—asking them to evaluate Bedouin and Hadhari dialects across social traits such as prestige, class, modernity, open-mindedness, masculinity, and purity of origin. This approach made it possible to observe not only how language is shifting, but also the social motivations behind those changes.

What was Heard in Young Voices ...

Across levels of language — sounds, grammar, vocabulary — clear signs of a shift in the language of the Bedouins towards Hadhari speech were found.



- **Pronunciation:** While older Bedouins used the traditional [dʒ] in *rajjaaal* and [k] in words like *kə̄m* (“how much”). Younger speakers, especially women, often replaced these with the Hadhari [y] and [tʃ], saying *rayyāl* and *tʃəm*.
- **Grammar:** The way to say “your name” to a woman — a small but telling feature — has undergone a shift. Older speakers said *ismish/ismis*. Among younger Bedouin women we studied, we found out that in their words, they copied the Hadhari pronunciation *ismitch*. Even core verbs like “I want” and “I see” now sound urban among the Bedouin women. They pronounce ‘*abbi*’ and not ‘*abghi*’ as their parents and grandparents.
- **Pronouns:** We found that even pronouns, which rarely show differences, were shifting too. Young women used Hadhari forms like *ʔohma* “they” and *ʔohwə* “he” more than men did. The Bedouin women pronounced the pronoun for “I” as ‘*aanaa*’, a shibboleth of the Hadhari dialect. When tiny details like pronouns and basic verbs shift, linguists know a major social realignment is in progress.

Women are Leading the Change

One of the strongest findings was the gender difference. Young women move towards the Hadhari dialect forms more than men. These interviews offer some insights. First, young women often described Hadhari speech as ‘standard’, *mutaḥaḍḍirah* ‘civilized’, and easier to use in professional and social spaces. Second, the Bedouin dialect is widely perceived — even by Bedouins — as masculine. That makes it less attractive to women who want to construct a feminine persona.

Young men, while not immune to change, hold onto Bedouin features more than women. Authenticity, toughness, and tribal pride still seem to have masculine appeal.

What People Believe about Their Speech Attitudes explain a great deal about the dialect shift. From this survey, a consistent picture of ideologies and perceptions about the Hadhari and Bedouin dialects emerges:

- **Hadhari Arabic** is perceived as modern,

prestigious, and socially mobile. Bedouins and Hadharis alike gave it high marks for social class, open-mindedness, and modernity.

- **Bedouin Arabic** is perceived as a sign of heritage, masculinity, and authenticity. It scored strongly for “purity of origin” and masculinity but weakly for prestige and openness.

Older Bedouins voiced disapproval of the changes, calling the shift to Hadhari *ʕeib* ‘shameful’. However, younger Bedouins were pragmatic. Many said the Hadhari speech helps them be understood, move comfortably in mixed settings, and fit urban norms.

A Mirror of Qatar’s Transformation

Although this research was grounded in Qatar, it reflected a broader phenomenon. Around the world, urbanization and education reshape perceptions of identity. Rural youth adopt speech styles linked to cities because cities concentrate power, prestige, and opportunity. Women, often agents of social change, tend to adopt upwardly mobile speech as it is perceived as cool and more prestigious. For Bedouin women, the perception of femininity of the Hadhari dialect was an added value.

Why the Dialect Shift Matters

Documenting linguistic change is crucial, as dialect is an everyday yet powerful marker of shifting identities, including gender roles, class mobility, and notions of belonging. Language reveals how speakers interpret modernization and negotiate new social identities. The study also opens avenues for further inquiry. For instance, Bedouin speech was found to strongly index masculinity. This raises the possibility that some young Hadhari men may adopt Bedouin linguistic features to sound tougher or more authentic. Anecdotal reports suggest that this may already be happening, but additional research is required to fully understand the adoption and social meaning of Bedouin features among Hadhari speakers.

For more information about the research, please scan the QR code:

