

Rethinking Vowel Epenthesis: A Sociophonetic Perspective

This study investigates the sociophonetic variation in vowel epenthesis in Jordanian Arabic, with a particular focus on the factors which can delimit its occurrence. It systematically examines the roles of linguistic factors—including lexical category, syllable count, epenthesis location, preceding syllable weight, and sonority profile—alongside key social variables such as age, gender, region, educational background, and degree of social contact. Employing Labov’s variationist framework (1972), the study draws on a corpus of spontaneous speech comprising 2,495 tokens from 64 sociolinguistic interviews with speakers from Irbid, Jordan. Statistical analyses, conducted using Rbrul (Johnson, 2009), reveal that linguistic constraints have no significant effect on epenthetic vowel occurrence. Instead, vowel epenthesis is entirely socially driven, with age, gender, regional background, and social contact emerging as the most salient predictors of variation.

This study expands on the role of contact and demographic change in reshaping linguistic practices, particularly within the context of the evolving urban-rural divide in Jordan. The findings indicate that as rural areas increasingly come into contact with urban linguistic norms, the lines between urban and rural speech communities are blurring, with the spread of vowel epenthesis symbolizing a significant shift in regional identity and linguistic behavior. Notably, the study also highlights the need to reassess the role of education in sociolinguistic studies, showing that it no longer serves as a reliable proxy for social contact, a conclusion that challenges earlier work in the field.

Therefore, this research not only contributes to the reevaluation of how linguistic variation is understood but also paves the way for further studies in multilingual and multicultural settings, where the dynamics of social identity and linguistic behavior are in constant flux. It calls for a rethinking of how we conceptualize the intersection of social forces and phonetic variation, offering a richer understanding of how language functions as a marker of identity, community, and social change. As the social fabric of Jordan, and indeed the broader Arab world, continues to evolve in response to technological advancements, migration patterns, and changing demographic structures, this study provides a crucial framework for future investigations into the complex and ever-changing landscape of sociophonetic variation.