

Register-Sensitive Grammatical Variation in Advanced Arabic

Maha Collinson¹
SOAS University of London

Received : 31.01.2026
Accepted : 19.03.2026
Published : 30.04.2026
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20078321>

Abstract

This study investigates register-sensitive grammatical variation from a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective, focusing on advanced users of Arabic in institutional media discourse. Arabic presents a complex learning target for second language learners due to its well-documented variation between Standard Arabic and regional spoken varieties. While sociolinguistic research has extensively documented such variation, less attention has been paid to how advanced learners acquire, manage, and deploy variable grammatical resources across registers.

Drawing on a quantitative and qualitative analysis of ten political broadcast interviews aired on BBC Arabic, the study examines how five highly proficient speakers selectively use morphosyntactic features associated with Standard Arabic and Egyptian/Levantine Arabic across two contrasting programme formats. Four syntactic variables are analysed: complementizers, demonstratives, negation, and relative markers. The paired design allows for direct comparison of the same speakers across institutional contexts, isolating the effect of register and interactional demands on grammatical choice.

The findings demonstrate that grammatical variability in advanced Arabic use is systematic rather than random. While all speakers employ hybrid linguistic repertoires, individual variables show differing degrees of sensitivity to register. Negation and complementizers are highly responsive to contextual constraints, whereas demonstratives and relative markers remain predominantly colloquial across settings. These patterns suggest that advanced proficiency involves selective access to competing grammatical options rather than categorical control of a single target norm.

The study contributes to SLA research by highlighting the role of register competence and syntactic variability in advanced second language use. Pedagogical implications are discussed with reference to Arabic language teaching, curriculum design, and assessment practices, arguing for explicit instruction in register awareness and variable grammar at advanced levels.

Keywords Arabic SLA, grammatical variation, register, broadcast discourse, advanced proficiency

¹ Maha Collinson is a lecturer in Arabic at SOAS University of London. Her research interests include sociolinguistic variation, register, Arabic language acquisition, and pedagogy.. Contact: mc86@soas.ac.uk ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-2266-0048>

1. Introduction

Arabic presents distinctive challenges for second language acquisition due to its extensive internal variation and the absence of a single spoken standard. Unlike many languages in which learners orient towards a relatively unified target norm, learners of Arabic must navigate a continuum of linguistic resources associated with Standard Arabic and regional spoken varieties. As a result, advanced proficiency in Arabic entails not only the acquisition of grammatical forms, but also the ability to deploy those forms appropriately across registers, genres, and institutional contexts (Albirini, 2016; Ryding, 2018). In Arabic, variability across Standard and colloquial varieties is not exceptional but constitutes a normal part of communicative practice, creating distinctive challenges for second language acquisition.

In recent years, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has increasingly moved away from deficit-oriented models of learner language and towards approaches that conceptualise variability as an inherent component of advanced proficiency. Usage-based accounts argue that grammatical knowledge is intrinsically probabilistic and shaped by frequency, usage patterns, and contextualised form–meaning mappings (Ellis, 2019). From this perspective, variability reflects learners’ sensitivity to distributional properties of input rather than incomplete acquisition. While usage-based SLA predicts such probabilistic grammatical behaviour, relatively little empirical work has examined how variability is distributed across specific morphosyntactic domains in Arabic. The present study responds to this gap by showing that variability is not uniform across the grammatical system, but is strongly conditioned by variable type and register.

Interface-oriented approaches further predict that optionality may persist even at very advanced stages of second language acquisition, particularly in domains where syntax interacts with discourse and pragmatic constraints (Sorace, 2011). Such residual optionality is therefore expected rather than anomalous. Building on this perspective, the present study aligns with interface-based predictions while extending them by demonstrating that register sensitivity in Arabic is variable-dependent: some morphosyntactic domains show markedly greater responsiveness to contextual and interactional pressures than others.

These theoretical developments are particularly salient in the case of Arabic. Sociolinguistic research has long documented systematic variation between Standard Arabic and colloquial varieties in native and near-native speech (Albirini, 2016). However, Arabic pedagogy has historically privileged Standard Arabic as the primary instructional target, often marginalising spoken varieties or treating non-standard forms as deviations from an idealised norm (Ryding, 2018). As a consequence, advanced learners may develop substantial explicit grammatical knowledge while lacking systematic guidance on how to manage variability and register in real-world communication. Recent SLA research has begun to challenge this orientation by showing that advanced learners of Arabic are capable of developing contextually appropriate multidialectal repertoires when variability is recognised as part of linguistic competence (Nassif, 2022, 2023).

Nevertheless, empirical guidance remains limited regarding how specific grammatical variables pattern across institutional registers and which domains are most sensitive to contextual pressures.

Research on advanced language learning further emphasises that proficiency involves the ability to align linguistic resources with genre- and register-specific demands, rather than the elimination of variability (Byrnes, 2020). From this perspective, variability is not incompatible with advanced proficiency, but constitutes a central component of communicative competence. Consistent with complexity-informed views of language development, variation is understood as an essential characteristic of language use, particularly in discourse-sensitive domains involving stance, evaluation, and interaction (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). The present study builds on these accounts by examining how such variation is realised in Arabic within a high-stakes institutional genre.

Institutional media discourse provides a particularly productive site for examining advanced register competence in Arabic. Political broadcast interviews require speakers to balance competing communicative demands, including authority, neutrality, and accessibility, under conditions of public scrutiny. These demands place pressure on speakers' grammatical systems and make visible how different morphosyntactic variables are mobilised across registers. Analysing such discourse therefore offers valuable insight into how advanced users of Arabic manage competing grammatical options in real time, extending SLA research on variable grammar to an under-researched language and genre.

The present study adopts an SLA-oriented approach to grammatical variation in Arabic by analysing morphosyntactic choices in political broadcast interviews aired on BBC Arabic. Focusing on four syntactic variables—complementizers, demonstratives, negation, and relative markers—the study examines how advanced speakers selectively deploy Standard Arabic and Egyptian/Levantine Arabic forms across two contrasting programme formats. By holding speaker identity constant, the study isolates the effect of register and interactional context on grammatical choice, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of variable-specific sensitivity.

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do advanced users of Arabic distribute Standard and colloquial morphosyntactic forms across contrasting institutional registers?
2. Do different syntactic variables exhibit different degrees of sensitivity to register and interactional context?
3. What do these patterns reveal about advanced grammatical competence in Arabic as a second language?
4. What implications do these findings have for the teaching, curriculum design, and assessment of advanced Arabic learners?

By integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative discourse analysis, this study responds directly to current SLA debates on variable grammar and advanced proficiency by showing how probabilistic, interface-sensitive grammatical knowledge is realised in Arabic across institutional registers. At

the same time, it offers empirically grounded insights into how register-sensitive grammatical competence can inform advanced Arabic language instruction, curriculum design, and assessment.

In what follows, I outline three strands of research that inform the analysis: (i) usage-based and probabilistic accounts of grammatical knowledge, (ii) interface-oriented approaches to optionality and advanced competence, and (iii) research on Arabic variation and its implications for second language pedagogy. Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical basis for interpreting grammatical variability in advanced Arabic as a second language.

1.1. Variable grammar and theoretical framework

This study is grounded in contemporary SLA research on variable grammar, advanced proficiency, and register-sensitive language use.

In recent SLA research, grammatical variability is increasingly understood as a core property of linguistic competence rather than as noise or performance error. Usage-based approaches argue that grammatical knowledge emerges from learners' cumulative experience with language in use and reflects the distributional properties of input across contexts (Ellis, 2019). From this perspective, linguistic representations are inherently probabilistic, and learners maintain competing form–function mappings whose activation depends on contextual cues, frequency, and communicative purpose.

Ellis (2019) explicitly argues that “linguistic knowledge is intrinsically probabilistic, reflecting the distributional properties of usage” (p. 40). Variability in learner language is therefore expected, particularly in domains where multiple forms compete for overlapping communicative functions. Importantly, usage-based SLA predicts that such variability will not be uniform across the grammatical system, but will cluster around specific constructions depending on their frequency, salience, and discourse function.

While usage-based models have been widely applied to languages with relatively stable spoken norms, less empirical work has examined how probabilistic grammatical knowledge operates in languages characterised by systematic internal variation, such as Arabic. The present study responds to this gap by examining how variability is distributed across specific morphosyntactic variables in Arabic and how this distribution is shaped by register and institutional context.

1.2. Interface effects in advanced SLA

A complementary line of research addresses the persistence of optionality at advanced stages of second language acquisition. Interface-oriented approaches, most prominently the Interface Hypothesis, propose that even highly proficient learners may exhibit residual variability in grammatical domains where syntax interacts with discourse and pragmatics (Sorace, 2011). Such optionality is not attributed to incomplete grammatical representations, but to processing and integration demands at the interfaces between linguistic modules.

Sorace (2011) characterises the Interface Hypothesis as an attempt to account for “patterns of non-convergence and residual optionality at very advanced stages of acquisition” (p. 1). From this perspective, variability is expected to be especially pronounced in discourse-sensitive domains involving evaluation, stance-taking, and interactional alignment. Importantly, interface-based accounts also predict that optionality will be selective rather than global, affecting some grammatical domains more than others.

The present study aligns with these predictions by examining whether different morphosyntactic variables in Arabic exhibit different degrees of register sensitivity. By comparing complementizers, demonstratives, negation, and relative markers, the analysis allows for a fine-grained assessment of how interface vulnerability manifests across the grammatical system. In doing so, the study extends interface-based SLA research to Arabic, a language whose grammatical variability is deeply intertwined with discourse and register distinctions.

1.3. Advanced proficiency, register competence, and genre

Research on advanced language learning has increasingly emphasised that proficiency involves the ability to deploy linguistic resources in ways that are appropriate to genre, register, and institutional context. Rather than equating advanced competence with categorical accuracy or convergence on a single norm, this work conceptualises proficiency as the capacity to align grammatical choices with communicative goals and audience expectations (Byrnes, 2020).

Byrnes (2020) argues that advanced language ability entails “the ability to align linguistic resources with genre- and context-specific demands” (p. 34). From this perspective, variability is not antithetical to proficiency but constitutes an essential component of successful communication across contexts. This view resonates with complexity-informed approaches to language development, which treat variation as an inherent characteristic of dynamic linguistic systems (Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

Larsen-Freeman (2018) explicitly notes that “variation is not noise but an essential characteristic of language use and development” (p. 56). Such accounts underscore the importance of examining how grammatical variability functions in authentic discourse settings, particularly in institutional genres that impose competing communicative constraints. Political broadcast interviews represent one such genre, requiring speakers to balance authority, neutrality, and accessibility under conditions of public scrutiny.

1.4. Arabic variation, SLA, and pedagogy

Arabic presents a particularly compelling context for examining variable grammar in SLA. Sociolinguistic research has long documented the coexistence of Standard Arabic and regional spoken varieties, as well as the routine use of hybrid forms in everyday communication (Albirini, 2016). Albirini observes that Arabic speakers “routinely draw on multiple varieties

as part of everyday communicative practice” (p. 4), highlighting the systematic nature of variation in Arabic.

Despite this sociolinguistic reality, Arabic pedagogy has historically privileged Standard Arabic as the primary instructional target. Ryding (2018) notes that Arabic teaching has “long privileged Modern Standard Arabic as the primary instructional target” (p. 12), often marginalising spoken varieties in curricula and assessment. As a result, learners may be insufficiently prepared to manage register-sensitive variability in real-world communication.

Recent SLA research has begun to address this gap by demonstrating that advanced learners of Arabic are capable of developing multidialectal repertoires and deploying them in contextually appropriate ways when variability is recognised as part of competence. Nassif (2022, 2023), for example, shows that advanced learners exhibit “contextually appropriate multidialectal practices” (Nassif, 2022, p. 219), particularly when instructional contexts legitimise variation.

However, while this work establishes the feasibility of multidialectal competence, less is known about how specific grammatical variables behave across registers and which domains are most sensitive to contextual pressures. The present study addresses this gap by providing empirical evidence on variable-specific sensitivity in Arabic and by linking these patterns to implications for advanced instruction, curriculum design, and assessment.

1.5. Positioning the present study

Taken together, the theoretical perspectives outlined above converge on the view that grammatical variability is a systematic and meaningful aspect of advanced second language competence. Building on usage-based and interface-oriented accounts of SLA, as well as research on register competence and Arabic pedagogy, the present study examines how variable grammar is realised in Arabic political broadcast discourse. By identifying variable-specific patterns of register sensitivity, the study extends existing SLA theory to an under-researched language and genre and provides empirically grounded insights that inform the teaching and assessment of advanced Arabic learners.

The following section outlines the methodology used in the study.

2. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, data sources, participants, analytical variables, and procedures used to examine register-sensitive grammatical variation in advanced Arabic.

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods design combining quantitative distributional analysis with qualitative interpretation of naturally occurring discourse. Such an approach allows for the examination of advanced grammatical competence as it is realised in authentic communicative contexts, rather than in elicited or decontextualised tasks, consistent with

contemporary SLA perspectives on advanced proficiency and register-sensitive language use.

The study is exploratory and descriptive in nature, aiming to identify systematic patterns of grammatical variability rather than to test the acquisition of specific forms in isolation. This design aligns with usage-based and discourse-oriented approaches to SLA, which emphasise the importance of contextualised language use for understanding advanced proficiency and probabilistic grammatical knowledge.

2.2. Participants

The dataset consists of ten political broadcast interviews aired on BBC Arabic, featuring five highly proficient speakers of Arabic. Each speaker appears in two contrasting programme formats. Although the speakers are public figures and experienced media participants, they are treated analytically as advanced users of Arabic whose language use provides insight into high-level grammatical and register competence rather than as representatives of native-speaker norms.

From an SLA perspective, these speakers can be understood as representing advanced or near-native levels of proficiency, characterised by extensive exposure to Arabic across institutional contexts and sustained engagement with both formal and informal registers (Polio, 2021; Rothman, 2022). Their language use therefore provides insight into advanced grammatical competence as it is realised beyond classroom settings, where register control and discourse sensitivity are central to successful communication (Byrnes, 2020; Sorace, 2011).

The paired design constitutes a methodological strength, as it allows for within-speaker comparison across interactional contexts. By holding speaker identity constant, the analysis isolates the effect of register and institutional framing on grammatical choice, reducing the influence of individual stylistic preferences.

2.3. Data collection and context

The two programme formats impose distinct interactional and institutional constraints. Programme A is characterised by a more formal interview structure, limited overlap, and a strong orientation toward institutional authority. Programme B adopts a more conversational format, allowing greater interactional flexibility, interpersonal engagement, and affective expression.

These formats are treated as contrasting register conditions. The comparison between them provides a naturalistic test of register-sensitive grammatical behaviour and allows for examination of how advanced speakers modulate morphosyntactic choices in response to differing interactional demands.

2.4. Linguistic variables

The analysis focuses on four morphosyntactic variables that index variation along the Standard Arabic–Egyptian/Levantine Arabic continuum: complementizers, demonstratives, negation, and relative markers. These

variables were selected because they differ in grammatical function, discourse salience, and hypothesised sensitivity to register and interactional context.

From an SLA perspective, examining multiple variables allows for assessment of whether grammatical variability is uniform across the system or variable-dependent, providing a more nuanced picture of advanced grammatical competence and interface sensitivity.

2.5. *Coding and analysis*

All interviews were transcribed orthographically. Tokens of each variable were identified and coded manually as instantiating either Standard Arabic or Egyptian/Levantine Arabic forms. Ambiguous cases were excluded to ensure analytical clarity and reliability. Coding decisions were applied consistently across the dataset to ensure comparability across variables and programme formats.

Quantitative analysis compares the distribution of Standard and colloquial forms across programme formats, while qualitative examples are used to illustrate how grammatical choices function interactionally in context. This combined approach allows for both the identification of systematic distributional patterns and the interpretation of their discourse-pragmatic significance.

All coding procedures were applied consistently across the dataset to ensure reliability.

3. Findings

This section presents the quantitative and qualitative findings of the analysis without interpretation.

3.1. *Quantitative findings*

This section presents the quantitative results from ten political broadcast interviews aired on BBC Arabic. The analysis examines four morphosyntactic variables indexing variation along the Standard Arabic–Egyptian/Levantine Arabic continuum: complementizers, demonstratives, negation, and relative markers.

Negation and complementizers show clear differences across programme formats, with a higher proportion of colloquial forms in Programme B. In contrast, demonstratives and relative markers remain predominantly colloquial across both formats.

Across all four variables, Programme A shows higher proportions of Standard Arabic (SA) forms than Programme B. However, the magnitude of this difference varies across variables. Negation and complementizers display the strongest sensitivity to programme format, with noticeable shifts in the distribution of SA and Egyptian/Levantine Arabic (EA/LA) forms across the two contexts. In contrast, demonstratives and relative markers show relatively stable distributions, remaining largely within the EA/LA range regardless of programme format.

These results show that the distribution of forms differs across morphosyntactic variables, with some variables showing greater differences between programme formats than others.

3.1.1. Complementizers (COMP)

Complementizers show clear programme-conditioned differentiation. As shown in Table 1, Standard Arabic complementizers (e.g. 'anna/'inna) occur more frequently in Programme A than in Programme B. In Programme A, SA accounts for 89/192 tokens (46.4%), while EA/LA accounts for 103/192 (53.6%). In Programme B, SA decreases to 29/162 (17.9%), while EA/LA increases to 133/162 (82.1%).

Table 1
Distribution of Standard Arabic and EA/LA complementizers across programmes

Programme	Standard Arabic (SA) 'an, 'anna, 'inna	EA/LA 'inn+	Total
A	89	103	192
B	29	133	162

3.1.2. Demonstratives (DEM)

Demonstratives show a programme effect, but in a more moderate form than COMP and NEG. Importantly, Table 2 shows that SA demonstratives are attested in both programmes, contrary to what the previous draft stated. In Programme A, SA demonstratives account for 58/152 tokens (38.2%) and EA/LA demonstratives for 94/152 (61.8%). In Programme B, SA demonstratives decrease to 27/156 (17.3%), while EA/LA demonstratives increase to 129/156 (82.7%).

Thus, demonstratives remain predominantly EA/LA in both programmes, they do not show categorical exclusion of Standard Arabic forms. Instead, the data indicate that speakers increase SA demonstratives in Programme A while relying much more heavily on EA/LA demonstratives in Programme B. Demonstratives occur predominantly in EA/LA forms in both programmes, with higher proportions of Standard Arabic forms in Programme A than in Programme B.

Table 2
Distribution of Standard Arabic and EA/LA demonstratives across programmes

Programme	Standard Arabic (SA) <i>haḏā, hāḏīhi, hā'ula, hakaḏa</i>	EA/LA <i>da, di, dol, kida hayda, haydi, hak, hayki</i>	Total
A	58	94	152
B	27	129	156

3.1.3. Negation (NEG)

Negation exhibits the strongest programme-conditioned differentiation in the dataset. As shown in Table 3, Programme A contains 169/319 SA

negation tokens (53.0%) compared with 150/319 EA/LA tokens (47.0%). In Programme B, SA negation falls sharply to 49/237 (20.7%), while EA/LA negation rises to 188/237 (79.3%).

Negation shows the largest difference in Standard Arabic usage between Programme A and Programme B. Among the four variables analysed, negation exhibits the greatest difference in distribution across programme formats.

Table 3

Distribution of Standard Arabic and EA/LA negation markers across programmes

Programme	Standard Arabic (SA) <i>mā, lan, lam, lā, laysa</i>	EA/LA <i>EA/LA dialectal negation markers</i>	Total
A	169	150	319
B	49	188	237

3.1.4. Relative markers (REL)

Relative markers show a strong programme effect, especially in Programme B. Table 4 indicates that in Programme A, SA relatives account for 28/72 tokens (38.9%), while EA/LA relatives account for 44/72 (61.1%). In Programme B, SA relatives are rare (4/46; 8.7%) and EA/LA relatives overwhelmingly dominate (42/46; 91.3%).

EA/LA relative markers account for the majority of tokens in both programmes, while Standard Arabic relative markers occur more frequently in Programme A than in Programme B. Standard Arabic relative markers occur infrequently in Programme B compared with Programme A.

Table 4

Distribution of Standard Arabic and EA/LA relative markers across programmes

Programme	Standard Arabic (SA) <i>'allaḏī, 'allatī</i>	EA/LA <i>'illi</i>	Total
A	28	44	72
B	4	42	46

3.1.5. Summary of variable sensitivity

Table 5 summarises SA usage by variable and programme. Across all four variables, SA is consistently higher in Programme A than Programme B, confirming an overall programme effect. However, the size of the shift differs by variable. Negation shows the largest reduction in SA between programmes (53.0% → 20.7%), followed by relative markers (38.9% → 8.7%) and complementizers (46.4% → 17.9%). Demonstratives show the smallest—though still clear—programme effect (38.2% → 17.3%). Differences in the distribution of Standard Arabic and EA/LA forms vary by variable rather than showing uniform shifts across all grammatical categories.

Table 5

Proportion of Standard Arabic usage by variable and programme (%)

Variable	Programme A (SA %)	Programme B (SA %)
Complementizers	46.4	17.9
Demonstratives	38.2	17.3
Negation	53.0	20.7
Relative markers	38.9	8.7

3.2. Qualitative findings

This section presents illustrative excerpts showing how morphosyntactic variation is realised in interactional contexts across programme formats. The examples demonstrate how Standard Arabic (SA) and Egyptian/Levantine Arabic (EA/LA) forms co-occur within the same stretches of discourse and how different variables appear in context.

Examples (1)–(3) show instances in which predominantly Standard-oriented discourse includes EA/LA morphosyntactic forms. In these excerpts, colloquial negation, complementizers, and lexical items appear alongside otherwise Standard structures, resulting in mixed constructions within a single turn.

Examples (4)–(6) illustrate cases in which clusters of EA/LA forms occur within short stretches of discourse. These clusters include multiple instances of colloquial negation, discourse markers, and demonstratives, often appearing in sequences that differ from more Standard-oriented segments elsewhere in the data.

Example (7) presents an instance of reported speech in which EA/LA forms are used within a narrative sequence. The excerpt shows how shifts in morphosyntactic form occur within extended discourse, including transitions between Standard and colloquial elements.

Across these examples, variation is realised through the distribution of morphosyntactic variables within and across utterances. The excerpts show that SA and EA/LA forms may co-occur within single turns, and that the frequency and clustering of forms differ across contexts and variables.

(1) ... li'annu l-waḍ' fi maṣr miš mazzbūṭ.
'... because the situation in Egypt is not good.'

This example shows the use of the EA negator miš and the adjective mazzbūṭ within an otherwise Standard-oriented structure.

(2) ... li'annu š-ša'b il-maṣrī ... haḍā huwa radd fi'lu min al-ḡaḍab ... ma kān da kulu ḥaṣal.
'... because the Egyptian people ... this is a reaction of anger ... this would not have happened.'

This example shows the use of the EA complementizer *li'annu* and the demonstrative *da* alongside Standard morphosyntactic elements.

- (3) ... *Yāsir 'Arafāt lam yataḥaddaṭ ma'ī ... tāba'tu kulla mā ya'tī fī hādīhi l-mufāwaḍāt.*
 '... Yasir Arafat did not talk to me ... I followed everything that happened in this negotiation.'

This example shows the use of SA negation *lam* and the demonstrative *hādīhi* within a discourse that otherwise includes EA/LA features.

- (4) *il-mas'la miš mas'alit furaṣ, huwa iḥna 'a'dīn fī sū'?*
 'It's not a matter of opportunities—are we sitting in a shop?'

This example shows the use of EA negation *miš* and a colloquial interrogative structure within an interactional response.

- (5) ... *lā, lā, huwa miš kida, ma huwāš 'ibyīḍ wi swid ... mafīš kalām ... 'ašān ... mati'darši ... mayimkinši ...*
 '... no, no, it's not like that, it isn't black and white ... there's no doubt ... because ... you can't ... we can't ...'

This example shows multiple instances of EA negation forms (*miš, ma huwāš, mafīš, mati'darši, mayimkinši*) occurring within a short stretch of discourse.

- (6) *lā, lā, dā kalām ḡayr ṣaḥīḥ ... 'inta gēbt il-ma'lūmāt dī min mīn?*
 'No, no, this is not correct ... who gave you this information?'

This example shows the use of EA demonstratives *dā* and *dī* within a corrective interaction.

- (7) ... *wa qāla lī bil-'āmmiyya ... "la''im Sa'dallāh Wannūs mā xalla walā xamīr walā fṭīr."*
 '... and he said to me in dialect ... "he's a cruel man, Saadallah Wannous—he didn't leave bread or yeast.'"

This example shows reported speech realised in EA/LA within a narrative sequence.

4. Discussion

This section interprets the findings presented above from a Second Language Acquisition perspective, situating them within current debates on variable grammar, advanced proficiency, and register-sensitive language use.

4.1. Quantitative evidence of register-sensitive grammatical variation

Consistent with complexity-informed views that treat variation as an essential characteristic of language use rather than noise (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), the findings of this study provide clear evidence that grammatical

variability in advanced Arabic use is systematic, variable-specific, and register-sensitive. Rather than exhibiting random alternation between Standard and colloquial forms, speakers demonstrate patterned preferences that align closely with institutional context and interactional demands. From an SLA perspective, these patterns are best understood as reflecting advanced grammatical competence shaped by discourse and register, rather than incomplete acquisition.

One of the most significant findings concerns the differential sensitivity of syntactic variables. Negation and complementizers show strong responsiveness to programme format, while demonstratives and relative markers remain predominantly colloquial across contexts. This hierarchy supports interface-based accounts of SLA, which predict that grammatical features interacting closely with discourse, stance, and pragmatics are more susceptible to contextual modulation than features serving primarily referential or structural functions (Sorace, 2011).

These results also align with usage-based SLA models, according to which learners develop probabilistic knowledge of competing forms through repeated exposure to contextually embedded input. Advanced proficiency, from this perspective, does not entail categorical control of a single variant, but rather flexible access to multiple options conditioned by communicative context (Ellis, 2019). The present findings provide empirical support for this view in the domain of Arabic morphosyntax.

Importantly, the study challenges pedagogical assumptions that equate variability with error. The speakers analysed here demonstrate high levels of communicative effectiveness and institutional legitimacy, despite extensive use of colloquial morphosyntactic forms. Their language use suggests that target-like performance in Arabic involves hybrid grammatical repertoires, particularly in spoken institutional genres where register demands are complex.

The paired interview design further reveals that register sensitivity is not uniform across speakers. Some individuals exhibit greater stylistic mobility than others, highlighting the role of experience, exposure, and metalinguistic awareness in shaping advanced competence. This finding resonates with SLA research showing that advanced learners differ not only in accuracy, but also in their ability to align grammatical choices with genre expectations (Byrnes, 2020).

Taken together, the quantitative results contribute to ongoing debates in SLA regarding the nature of advanced competence, the role of variability, and the relationship between grammar and discourse. They also extend these debates into the under-researched domain of Arabic as a second language.

While the quantitative patterns discussed above establish systematic differences in the distribution of grammatical variables across programme formats, a closer examination of individual excerpts helps illustrate how these patterns are realised in real-time interaction and how advanced users deploy variable forms to manage register, stance, and affect.

4.2. Qualitative illustration of advanced register competence and strategic code-switching

To complement the quantitative patterns discussed above, this subsection presents a set of illustrative excerpts that demonstrate how advanced users of Arabic realise register-sensitive grammatical variation in interaction.

From an SLA perspective, these examples serve two related purposes. First, they illustrate hybrid grammatical production as an expression of advanced register competence, in which speakers systematically combine Standard Arabic (SA) and Egyptian/Levantine Arabic (EA/LA) features within the same stretch of discourse. Second, they demonstrate strategic code-switching associated with stance, affect, and interactional pressure, phenomena that have been identified in SLA research as sites of interface vulnerability and advanced pragmatic control (Sorace, 2011; Rothman, 2022).

Rather than treating such alternation as instability or performance error, the present analysis interprets these patterns as evidence of target-like variability shaped by discourse demands and institutional context. This interpretation aligns with usage-based and interface-oriented SLA approaches, which emphasise that advanced competence involves flexible access to competing grammatical options rather than categorical consistency (Ellis, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

4.3. Hybrid grammatical production and advanced register competence

Examples (1)–(3) illustrate hybrid grammatical production in which broadly Standard-oriented discourse incorporates salient EA/LA morphosyntactic and lexical features. In Example (1), the interviewee evaluates the political situation in Egypt using EA negation and an EA evaluative adjective embedded within an otherwise Standard frame:

(1) ... li'annu l-waḍ' fi maṣr miš mazbūṭ.
'... because the situation in Egypt is not good.'

Here, hybridity is realised through the EA negator *miš* (rather than SA *laysa*) and the adjective *mazbūṭ* in place of a Standard equivalent. From an SLA perspective, this pattern reflects selective deployment of discourse-sensitive grammatical resources: the speaker maintains a largely Standard frame while adopting colloquial forms at a point of evaluation. This qualitative pattern mirrors the quantitative findings discussed above, supporting interface-based accounts that identify evaluative domains as particularly variable in advanced language use (Sorace & Serratrice, 2009).

A similar configuration appears in Example (2), where EA complementizers and demonstratives are embedded within extended stretches of Standard-oriented discourse:

(2) ... li'annu š-ša'b il-maṣrī ... haḏā huwa radd fi'lu min al-ḡaḏab ... ma kān
da kulu ḥaṣal.
'... because the Egyptian people ... this is a reaction of anger ... this would not have happened.'

The use of the EA complementizer *li'annu* and demonstrative *da* alongside SA morphosyntax illustrates how hybrid production may persist across longer turns. In SLA terms, this supports the view that advanced learners develop coherent hybrid registers rather than alternating randomly between varieties. Such production reflects stable probabilistic knowledge of form–context associations, a hallmark of advanced proficiency in usage-based models of SLA (Ellis, 2019).

Example (3) demonstrates hybridity in the opposite direction. Here, the interviewee's discourse is predominantly EA/LA, but includes a shift into SA forms, marked by the SA negator *lam* and demonstrative *hāḍihi*:

(3) ... *Yāsir 'Arafāt lam yataḥaddaṭ ma'ī ... tāba'tu kulla mā ya'tī fi hāḍihi l-mufāwaḍāt.*

'... Yasir Arafat did not talk to me ... I followed everything that happened in this negotiation.'

The insertion of SA forms within an EA-dominant stretch suggests that advanced users draw flexibly on Standard features at moments associated with evidential framing and rhetorical elevation. This bidirectional hybridity reinforces the interpretation of variable production as interactionally managed competence, rather than accidental mixing, and aligns with SLA research emphasising register control as a component of advanced language ability (Byrnes, 2020).

4.4. *Strategic code-switching, stance, and affect*

In contrast to hybrid production, Examples (4)–(6) illustrate cases where dense clusters of EA features appear in response to interactional challenge, consistent with strategic code-switching for stance and affect.

(4) *il-mas'la miš mas'alit furaṣ, huwa iḥna 'a'dīn fi sū'?*
'It's not a matter of opportunities—are we sitting in a shop?'

(5) ... *lā, lā, huwa miš kida, ma huwāš 'ibyīḍ wi swid ... mafīš kalām ... 'ašān ...*
... *mati'darši ... mayimkinši ...*
'... no, no, it's not like that, it isn't black and white ... there's no doubt ... because ... you can't ... we can't ...'

(6) *lā, lā, dā kalām ġayr ṣaḥīḥ ... 'inta ġēbt il-ma'lūmāt dī min mīn?*
'No, no, this is not correct ... who gave you this information?'

These excerpts show clustering of EA forms in interactional responses, including negation and demonstratives. From an SLA perspective, such clustering is associated with affective stance and discourse pressure, domains in which interface effects between syntax and pragmatics are particularly prominent (Sorace, 2011).

4.5. Narrative framing, reported speech, and affect

Example (7) illustrates strategic code-switching in a narrative context associated with heightened affect:

(7) ... wa qāla lī bil-‘āmmiyya ... “la’im Sa‘dallāh Wannūs mā xalla walā
 xamīr walā ftīr.”
 ‘... and he said to me in dialect ... “he’s a cruel man, Saadallah Wannous—
 he didn’t leave bread or yeast.”’

The use of EA/LA forms in reported speech highlights shifts in register within narrative sequences and reflects the role of colloquial forms in conveying immediacy and affect in discourse (Byrnes, 2020; Polio, 2021).

4.6. Summary and SLA relevance

Taken together, the qualitative examples demonstrate that hybrid grammatical production and strategic code-switching coexist as complementary practices in advanced Arabic use. Hybrid production reflects the unmarked register of institutional broadcast discourse, while strategic switching emerges at moments of evaluative intensity, interactional challenge, or emotional emphasis. These qualitative observations align with the quantitative findings presented above, showing that variables that differ across programme formats are also those that cluster in interactionally salient contexts.

From an SLA perspective, these findings contribute to debates on the nature of advanced proficiency by showing that successful language use involves managing variability across registers rather than eliminating it. They also underscore the pedagogical importance of exposing advanced learners to authentic discourse and explicitly addressing variability, stance, and register in Arabic language instruction.

4.7. Pedagogical implications

This section discusses the pedagogical implications of the findings, with particular reference to classroom practice, curriculum design, and assessment in advanced Arabic language instruction.

4.7.1. Classroom practice

The findings of this study suggest that instruction for advanced learners of Arabic should move beyond an exclusive focus on Standard Arabic forms and explicitly address register-conditioned grammatical variation. Rather than treating morphosyntactic alternation as error, teachers can frame variability as a set of meaningful grammatical choices linked to context, stance, and genre. Classroom activities that draw on authentic media discourse, such as broadcast interviews, can be particularly effective in raising learners’ awareness of how grammatical forms are distributed across institutional settings.

Task-based activities that require learners to adapt the same propositional content to different registers (e.g. a formal political interview versus a conversational discussion) may be especially effective in developing advanced register competence. Such tasks allow learners to experiment with

variables that are highly sensitive to context, such as negation and complementizers, while reflecting the probabilistic nature of grammatical choice observed in the present findings. This approach is consistent with usage-based pedagogies that emphasise repeated exposure to contextually embedded input as a mechanism for developing flexible grammatical knowledge (Ellis, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2018).

4.7.2. Curriculum design

At the curriculum level, the study supports calls for integrated approaches to Standard and spoken Arabic at advanced stages of instruction. Rather than treating colloquial forms as peripheral or optional, curricula should frame them as essential components of advanced communicative competence. Instructional sequencing should reflect the fact that grammatical variables differ in their sensitivity to register, and that some domains—such as negation and complementizers—are more responsive to institutional context than others.

Explicit instruction in register awareness, including discussion of institutional norms, genre expectations, and audience design, can help learners develop metalinguistic control over variable forms. This orientation aligns with genre-based models of advanced language instruction, which emphasise the role of discourse context in shaping grammatical choice and proficiency development (Byrnes, 2020; Byrnes & Maxim, 2018).

4.7.3. Assessment

The findings also have important implications for assessment practices in advanced Arabic programs. Traditional accuracy-based evaluation risks misrepresenting learner competence by penalising contextually appropriate variability. Assessment frameworks that treat Standard Arabic as the sole benchmark may obscure learners' developing ability to align grammatical choices with communicative context and institutional register.

Recognising register-conditioned grammatical variation can support both teachers and learners by clarifying what constitutes acceptable advanced performance in Arabic. For teachers, such an approach allows for more accurate and equitable evaluation of learner output, particularly in spoken tasks designed to simulate real-world institutional contexts (Byrnes, 2020; Polio, 2021). For learners, explicit assessment criteria that acknowledge variable but contextually appropriate forms can foster greater confidence and encourage engagement with complex registers, rather than reinforcing avoidance strategies driven by fear of penalisation (Ellis, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2018). Framing assessment in terms of register appropriateness rather than categorical correctness thus aligns instructional goals with authentic language use and reflects contemporary SLA views of advanced competence as adaptive and context-sensitive (Rothman, 2022).

5. Conclusions

This study has examined register-sensitive grammatical variation in advanced Arabic from a Second Language Acquisition perspective. By analysing morphosyntactic choices in political broadcast interviews, the

study has shown that variability in Arabic is systematic, variable-specific, and strongly conditioned by register and interactional context. Rather than reflecting incomplete acquisition or instability, such variability emerges as a hallmark of advanced grammatical competence, shaped by discourse demands, institutional norms, and communicative goals.

The findings contribute to SLA theory by extending usage-based and interface-oriented accounts of variable grammar to Arabic morphosyntax, a language characterised by systematic internal variation that has received comparatively little attention in SLA research. By demonstrating that different grammatical domains exhibit different degrees of sensitivity to register, the study refines existing accounts of advanced proficiency and highlights the importance of variable-specific analysis in understanding how grammatical knowledge is deployed in real-world contexts.

At the pedagogical level, the study contributes to the teaching of Arabic as a second language by challenging monolithic conceptions of target norms and by underscoring the central role of register competence at advanced stages of learning. The findings support instructional approaches that treat variability not as error, but as an integral component of communicative competence, and they provide empirically grounded guidance for classroom practice, curriculum design, and assessment. In particular, they suggest that advanced instruction should prioritise learners' ability to align grammatical choices with genre, audience, and institutional context.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations that point to directions for future research. The analysis is based on a relatively small number of highly proficient speakers and focuses on a single institutional genre, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Future research could extend this approach to classroom interaction, learner corpora, or instructional settings in order to examine how register-sensitive grammatical competence develops across proficiency levels and in response to pedagogical input. Longitudinal and classroom-based studies would be especially valuable in exploring how explicit instruction in variability and register awareness influences learner outcomes, as suggested by recent SLA research on advanced proficiency and usage-based learning (Ellis, 2019; DeKeyser, 2020; Byrnes & Maxim, 2018).

Author contribution statement:

The author designed the research, collected and analysed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

The usage of GenAI: No generative AI tools were used in the research or writing of this manuscript.

References

- Albirini, A. (2016). *Modern Arabic sociolinguistics: Diglossia, variation, codeswitching, attitudes and identity*. Routledge.
- Byrnes, H. (2020). *Advanced language learning: The contribution of Halliday and Vygotsky*. Bloomsbury.

- Byrnes, H., & Maxim, H. (2018). Advanced language learning and the multilingual turn. *The Modern Language Journal*, 102(S1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12468>
- DeKeyser, R. (2020). Skill acquisition theory and L2 learning. In B. VanPatten, G. D. Keating, & S. Wulff (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition: An introduction* (3rd ed., pp. 94–112). Routledge.
- Ellis, N. C. (2019). Essentials of a theory of language cognition. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103(S1), 39–60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12532>
- Larsen-Freeman, D. (2018). Complexity theory and language development. In P. Garrett & J. Verschueren (Eds.), *The handbook of pragmatics* (pp. 1–15). Wiley.
- Nassif, L. (2022). Multidialectal use of Arabic as a second language: Advanced learners' sociolinguistic competence. *Arabic Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(2), 201–223.
- Nassif, L. (2023). Sociolinguistic awareness and register control in advanced learners of Arabic. *Foreign Language Annals*, 56(3), 471–489. <https://doi.org/10.1111/flan.12715>
- Polio, C. (2021). Research on advanced L2 writing and speaking. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 41, 180–197. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190521000095>
- Rothman, J. (2022). What is competence in bilingualism? *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 12(3), 315–342. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.21003.rot>
- Ryding, K. C. (2018). *Teaching and learning Arabic as a foreign language: A guide for teachers*. Georgetown University Press.
- Sorace, A. (2011). Pinning down the concept of “interface” in bilingualism. *Linguistic Approaches to Bilingualism*, 1(1), 1–33. <https://doi.org/10.1075/lab.1.1.01sor>
- Sorace, A., & Serratrice, L. (2009). Internal and external interfaces in bilingual language development. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 13(2), 195–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006909339810>
- Towler, M. A. (2025). Arabic language tutors' beliefs about including regional varieties in higher education. *System*, 118, 103058. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2025.103058>
- Wilmsen, D. (2021). Dialect, standard, and pedagogy in Arabic language instruction. *Journal of Arabic Linguistics*, 7(2), 145–168.