A Sociophonetic Study of Arabic Emphatic Sound [dˤ]

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Drawing from the fact that Arabic is spoken as standard and non-standard varieties, we look in depth at the acoustic properties of the emphatic voiced stop [dˤ]. Although the voiced emphatic stop is maintained in the language, we find that it has varied phonetic properties due to social, cultural, and religious factors. It is also articulated in this manner in cultural settings. However, the voiced dental fricative emphatic consonant [ˤ] is normally substituted for [dˤ] in everyday conversations. For example, [dˤ] 'guest' is pronounced as [ˤ].

Interestingly, while measuring the voice onset time (VOT) of this stop and other seven in the Arabic consonant system, widely varying results were found for speakers for [dˤ] but not for the other stops. The VOTs of Arabic speakers from southern Saudi Arabia with different backgrounds were measured. All had widely varying VOTs for [dˤ] regardless of their background. We interpret this variation to mean that the voiced emphatic stop is relatively less frequent in the speech of Arabic speakers than the other seven stops and that speakers find it more difficult to pronounce the voiced emphatic stop than the other stops. We suggest that this is one reason why the voiced dental fricative emphatic sound [ˤ] is normally substituted for the voiced emphatic stop [dˤ] and that in some other cases the voiced alveolar stop [d] is substituted for [dˤ] in everyday conversations.

We conclude that even though the emphatic stop [dˤ] is normally replaced by [ˤ] in daily conversation in Arabic and is relatively less frequent in the language than the other stops, it is significant for cultural and religious considerations and will continue to be maintained in both the standard language and in regional dialects.

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