

## The Women (and Men) Who Talk Funnyii: Negotiating Gender and Prestige through the Palatalized Nasal in Cairene Arabic

This study examines the use of a palatalized variant of the alveolar nasal in the speech of Cairene Egyptians. Haeri demonstrated in her works on Egyptian Arabic that palatalization of alveolar plosives is an innovation of upper-middle class women (1996). She posited that palatalized consonants contain iconic values that evoke a certain expressive stance or “posture” that is more socially appropriate for one sex than the other. The palatalized sounds whose social meanings have thus far been discussed in Cairene Arabic include the stops /t, d/ and their pharyngealized counterparts /t<sup>ħ</sup>, d<sup>ħ</sup>/. The nasal /n/ has been noted to undergo palatalization in Cairene Arabic in all of the phonetic environments surrounding the palatalized stops (Geenberg 2012), but no social perceptions have been examined for this sound. Through several years of in-country participation-observation as well as observations of its uses in films and television, I hypothesized that the palatalized Cairene nasal is a socially salient variable indexing a distinct type of femininity: the *bint dal:u:ʕa* — somewhat parallel to the “pampered” American “valley girl.” My study tests this hypothesis by acoustically describing and examining the frequency of the palatalized nasal across three speech contexts: reading, free speech, and performance of the *dal:u:ʕa* stereotype. A total of 15 native speakers were recorded in Cairo, including 7 women and 8 men between the ages of 21-27, with socioeconomic backgrounds ranging from the lower-middle to upper classes. Each recording session lasted between 20-60 minutes, and tokens containing /n/ and /t, d/ in the high-front vowel environment were collected and acoustically examined. Using formant transitions as a cue for place of articulation, I contrast the “rising” pattern of F2 in the alveolar nasal against the “flat” F2 in the palatalized nasal formant transition from the vowel onset into its steady-state in the syllable-final /ni/ environment. In examining productions of the nasal by the 15 participants, I find systematic evidence to the strategic use (or lack of use) of the palatalized nasal across the three speech contexts. I further observe that while the palatalized stops /t, d/ described by Haeri have become fairly widespread in the productions of both men and women in this study, the less-frequent but clear presence of the palatalized nasal /n/ may render it a new marker for gender that is undergoing negotiation in terms of social meaning. The observed findings further complicate the notions of prestigious or standard Arabic forms, as well as the construction of sex and gender differentiation.

**Subfields:** sociolinguistics, phonetics