Syrian-Arabic

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1. Language description

Syrian Arabic is one of the varieties of the Arabic language of the middle east. Other varieties are Egyptian, Jordanian, Iraqiyan, Moroccan, etc. According to Abd-El-Jawad (1992).
Within the Syrian Arabic itself, a wide range of varieties also exist namely Shamiya, Halabiya, Hamwiya, Homsiya, Idlibiya, Raqqawiya, As-Suwaydaiya, Daraawiya, Deir ez-Zoriya, Hasakawiya, Latakiawiya, Quneitriya, Rif Dimashqiya, and Tartusiya. This list is mentioned here to highlight the wide varieties of Syrian Arabic. It is also important to emphazise that there is not *one* variety of Arabic. The differences between the varieties can be in vowels and consonants and it can also be lexical.

Examples are provided respectively:

Dialect	*Pronunciation*	
Raqqawiya	/ʃlonətʃ/	(how are you?)
Halabiya	/ʃlonək /	
hamiya	/ki:fak/	

Syrian Arabic is based partially on the Standard Arabic but also several French and Turkish words are used in the Syrian Arabic related to reminisces of the colonial phases and they are just treated by Syrian people as Syrian dialect. This Syrian dialect is spoken in fourteen provinces Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Idlib, Raqqa, As-Suwayda, Daraa, Deir ez-Zor, Hasaka, Latakia, Quneitra, Rif Dimashq, and Tartus.
Syrian Arabic is used by 18,284,407 speakers according to 2018 estimate in Wikipedia. The official language in Syria is Classical Arabic. It is the language that is used in educational settings, public speeches of politicians as well as in the media namely television and radio mainly in the news reports. Children start learning the Classical Arabic when the go to school around the age of 6. However, children hear the Classical Arabic through the media or Cartoon films. Therefore, it can be said that phonetic representation of the Classical Arabic starts at an early age but acquiring the written form starts later when children start going to school. The language that the child hears from birth is the Syrian variety.

According to Owaida (2015), Syrian Arabic does not have the consonants /θ, /ð, / ðˤ/ and that Syrian children start to acquire these consonants in school settings. However, children hear these consonants at home through television, radio or in mosques. We assume that hearing these phonemes will influence their emerging consonant system.

Consonant system

Table 1

Syrian Arabic consonant system (Shami dialect) (thesis Owaida 2015)

	Coronal						Dorsal			
	Bilabial	Labiodental	Dental	Alveolar	Postalveolair	Palataal	Velar	Uvular	Pharyngal	Glottal
plosive	p₁ b			t d			k g	q		ʔ
emphatic				tˤ dˤ						
nasal	m			n						
trill			r							
fricative		f v₁		s z	ʃ ʒ		x̲ ɣ̲		ħ ʕ	h
emphatic				sˤ zˤ						
liquids				l						
approximant	w					j				

₁ only in loan words (European)

₂ the voiced uvular plosive /q/ is replaced in several Syrian varieties by the voiceless glottal plosive /ʔ/

In all Syrian varieties, the uvular plosive /q/ is used when it appears in a loanword from the Standard Arabic like /quran/ (holy Islamic book) and /qarja/ (village). Several Syrian varieties do not replace the uvular plosive /q/ by the glottal stop /ʔ/. They just use the uvular plosive /q/ in their Syrian dialect.

The emphatic consonants are phonemic. However, even if the emphatic is not used properly, no confusion arises because meaning can just be retrieved from the context. Syrian language knows the existence of several emphatic words but children of 3 or 4 years are not expected to pronounce them perfectly yet. The emphatic consonants in the Syrian dialect are pronounced lighter in comparison with the realization in Standard Arabic.

Syllable structure

In Shami and Modern Standard Arabic every syllable has to start with a consonant. CV and CVC are the most dominant syllabic structures. In the Shami the consonant clusters are allowed at the beginning and at the end of the word. The final consonant clusters are not realized in all contexts in the Shami. Many Syrian people use epenthesis to separate the two consonants into a cluster, for example in Modern Standard Arabic /ʒisr/ is pronounced in Syrian as [ʒisir] "bridge". Epenthesis occurs not only in Syrian, but also in neighboring dialects such as Lebanese, Palestinian and Jordanian.

Stress

In Syrian, stress is standard on the penultimate syllable. It does not matter whether the syllable is a CV or a CVC. When a word consists of two syllables, the first syllable gets the emphasis. For example, if a word consists of four syllables, the third syllable (the penultimate) receives the main accent and a secondary accent is placed on the first syllable.

The phenomenon of 'shedda', which occurs in Standard Arabic, also occurs in Syrian. That is, emphasis on a particular consonant in the word. This is indicated in IPA with a colon: lengthening the consonant. In Syrian too, the shedda has an influence on the meaning, especially in verbs.

2. Phonological development

In the study of Owaida (2015), 160 normally developed Syrian children from Damascus were tested. The aim of the study was to collect reliable data on speech acquisition and phonological error patterns in children aged 2; 6 years to 6; 5 years (see Table 2). This research showed that word-final consonants in all age categories were produced significantly more often correctly than consonants in the initial and middle positions.

Table 2
Age of acquisition of consonants in Syrian Arabic (from dissertation by Owaida 2015)

Age	Phoneme
2;6- 2;11	b, f, j, m, n, l, t, ʔ, w, ħ
3;0- 3;5	d, h
3;6-3;11	ʕ, s, z
4;0- 4;5	x,
4;6-4;11	k , dˤ, tˤ
5;0- 5;5	ɣ
5;6- 5;11	r, sˤ, ʃ
6;0-6;5	all consonants acquired, except the fricative /ʒ/

3. Common phonological processes

The phonological processes below (with examples) are part of the normal phonological development of Syrian children. The 'epenthesis' process, is common among adult speakers of the Syrian dialect and the expectation is that this can also be observed in small children. The study of Owaida (2015) showed that around the age of 5;5 years most phonological processes have disappeared. Backing and glottalization are the first to do so. R-deviation and fronting disappear as last.

Table 3
Common phonological processes

Process	Examples
r-deviation	tˤɑjjɑrɑ → tˤɑjjɑjɑ
Fronting	ʕankɑbut → ʕantɑbut
Deletion of fricative	ze:tu:n → e:tu:n
De-emphatisation	batˤ: ix → battix
Deletion weak syllable	hədijə → θijə
Backing	təm → kəm
Glottalization	ʕankɑbut → ʔankɑbut
Devoicing	walad → walat

4. Lexical variation

The Speakaboo items are transcribed in Syrian dialect, but there is always a possibility that pictures are named in Classical Arabic, because children are exposed to Classical Arabic through television. If a child does not name the picture with the target word, please ask the interpreter about the meaning of this deviant production.

Common Syrian alternatives are listed in table 4.

Table 4
Lexical variation

Item	Target pronunciation	Lexical alternatives
3.mouth	təm	təmna (our mouth) sen (tooth) snan (teeth)
4.hand	ʔi:d	ʔi:den (plural) ʔi:di (my hand)
6.banana	moz	mo:zə (plural)
8.olives	ze:tu:n	inab (grapes)
9. boy	walad	s:abi (synonym)
14.doll	ləʕbə	bint (girl)
15.fire	nɑ:r	hari:? (there's a fire!)
16.doctor	dəktɔr	ʕamo (uncle) rejal (man)
19.sheep	xaruf	mezæ (goat) bakara (cow)
23.flowers	wɑrd	wɑrdə (singular) wɑrdɑ:t (plural)
30.book	ktæb	daftar (notebook) wraʔ(paper)
31.horse	ħsʿɑ:n	ħmɑ:l (donkey)
32.neck	rɑʔbə	rɑʔbti (my neck)

5. Results of typically developing Syrian toddlers

In the winter of 2018, 20 typically developing Syrian children between the age of 33.00 and 62.00 were tested with the words from Speakaboo, but offered via a paper lotto game. The children had an average age of 45.9 months

The test was conducted by Zahraa Attar, who works as a linguist research assistant in the Netherlands. She is herself Syrian and came in 2014 to the Netherlands. The children were asked to match the image shown with the same image on a lotto sheet and then naming the word. If the child would not name a word spontaneously, a cue sentence would be given. If the child would then still be unable to say the word, it would be prompted. If the child would then not want to repeat the word, that item would be skipped.

All productions of the children were scored on a score sheet. The Syrian test contains a total of 39 words and 117 consonants.

The averages of this group are shown in table 5.

Table 5
Average scores of typically developing Syrian children

Age in months	45.9
Number of words not spontaneously named	16,4
Number of consonants assessed	116,5
Number of consonants incorrect including the θ & ð errors	17,2
Number of consonants incorrect without the θ & ð errors	15,9
Total number of consonants correct	98,8
Number of consonant correct excluding θ & ð errors	100,8
Percentage Consonants Correct (PCC)	84,8
PCC excluding θ & ð errors	86,5

Two numbers of errors have been considered in the results; one including the θ & ð errors and another one excluding those errors.
During testing, several children replaced /s/ and /z/ by /θ/ and /ð/. This could be considered a normal distortion (and thus not an error) or a real substation. Although /θ/ and /ð/ are not part of Syrian Arabic, Classical Arabic contains these sounds as phonemes and Syrian children are exposed to these phonemes since an early age. Also, in Quran, a good pronunciation of all phonemes is usually highly stressed by parents. There are reasons to assume that children have some sort of phonological representation of these sounds and use them instead of the /s/ and /z/ erroneously.
Therefore, in these results, we calculated the average scores including the θ & ð errors and without them.

Striking is that most of the children make few phonological errors, but they have to repeat many words. The items that needed to be prompted most are shown in table 6.

Table 6
Items that needed to be repeated the most

item	frequency
13.camel	15
38.spider	15
18.melon	14
26.frog	14
19.sheep	14
8.olives	14
21.monkey	13
2.elephant	13
30.book	12
32.neck	12
33.jam	12
17.box	11
5.bear	10
10.present	10

Example of an average score

Case Syrian: Girl, 49 months

Number of errors including θ & ð errors:	9
Number of errors excluding θ & ð errors:	1
Words repeated:	7
Unable to assess:	0
Assessed:	117
Correct including θ & ð errors:	108 (117-9)
Correct excluding θ & ð errors:	116 (117-1)
PCC including θ & ð errors:	92,307 (108/117*100)
PCC excluding θ & ð errors:	99,145% (116/117*100)

Example of completed Syrian score form

Woord	Arabische spelling	IPA								NG	Proces/Opmerkingen
1.deur	باب	b	æ	b							
2.olifant	فيل	f	i:	l							
3.mond	تم	t	ə	m							
4.hand	إيد	ʔ	i:	d							
5.beer	دب	d	ə	b							
6.banaan	موزة	m	o:	~~z~~	ə						z - ð
7.bal	طابة	tˤ	ɑ	b	ə						
8.olijven	زيتون	~~z~~	e:	t	u:	n					z - ð
9. jongen	ولد	w	a	l	a	d				NG	/Sabi/boy
10.kado	هدية	h	a	d	i	j	ə			NG	/cadeautje/
11.melk	حليب	ħ	a	l	i:	b				NG	
12.trap	درج	d	ɑ	r	ɑ	ʒ					
13.kameel	جمل	ʒ	ɑ	m	ɑ	l					
14.pop	لعبة	l	ə	ʕ	b	ə					/poptje/
15.vuur	نار	n	ɑ:	r							
16.dokter	دكتور	d	ə	k	t	ɔ	r				
17.doos	سندوئ	~~sˤ~~	ɑ	n	d	u:	ʔ				sˤ - θ
18.meloen	بطيخ	b	ɑ	tˤ:	i:	x					
19.schaap	خروف	x	ɑ	r	u:	f				NG	/bakara/ cow
20.hond	كلب	k	a	l	b						
21.aap	إرد	ʔ	r	d						NG	/gorilla/
22.haar	شعر	ʃ	ɑ	ʕ	r						
23.bloemen	ورد	w	ɑ	r	d						
24.kussen	مخدة	m	x	ɑ	d:	ə					
25.stoel	كرسى	k	ə	r	~~s~~	i					s - θ
26.kikker	ضفدع	dˤ	ə	f	dˤ	ɑ	ʕ			NG	
27.vliegtuig	طيارة	tˤ	ɑ	i	j:	ɑ	r	ɑ			
28.wasmachine	غسالة	ɣ	a	~~s~~	a	l	ə				s: - θ
29.sok	جراب	ʒ	r	ɑ:	b						
30.boek	كتاب	k	t	æ	b						
31.paard	حصان	ħ	~~sˤ~~	ɑ:	n						sˤ - θ
32.nek	رئبة	r	ɑ	ʔ	b	ə				NG	
33.jam	مربى	m	r	ɑ	b:	ɑ					
34.bord	صحن	~~sˤ~~	ɑ	ħ	ə	n					sˤ - θ
35.kast	خزانة	x	~~z~~	æ	n	ə					z - ð
36.tas	شنتاية	ʃ	a	n	t	æ	j	ə			
37.boom	شجرة	ʃ	a	ʒ	a	r	ɑ				
38.spin	عنكبوت	~~ʕ~~	a	n	k	ɑ	b	u:	t		ʕ - ʔ
39.fiets	بسكليت	b	ə	s	k	l	e:	t			
Totaal aantal consonanten fout											**A.** 1 (ex. θ & ð errors) **A.** 9 (incl. θ & ð errors)
Totaal aantal consonanten geproduceerd											**B. 117**
PCC	**(B-A) / B * 100**										**PCC.** 99,145% **PCC.** 92,307%

6. Sources

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