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Saudis' Attitudes Towards Their Dialects: A Keyword Technique

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ABSTRACT

Language attitude research uncovers perceptions about the diversity of languages and dialects. It follows how such diversity is stereotypically perceived, which influences the usage of dialects among people. Therefore, diverse contexts, such as Saudi Arabia, necessitate research attention to reveal how stereotypes Saudis hold towards their dialects might affect their usage. Little research has focused on the broad language attitudes in Saudi Arabia, and none of the previous studies have identified the major language attitudes in the region using keyword technique. Using an open-ended questionnaire, the present study identifies the major attitudes regarding the main dialects in the country: Central, Northern, Southern, Eastern and Western dialects. The names of the dialects were represented conceptually in the questionnaire. Seventy-eight participants were recruited for the study. First, they were asked to write down their first impressions of Saudi dialects. Second, they were asked to name the most dominant spoken dialect. Eight evaluative themes emerged from the study: *affective positive, affective negative, linguistic features, awareness of language variation, cultural association, geographical association, tradition* and *modernity*. Each of them reflects vivid stereotypical suppositions of the dialects. Furthermore, 68% of participants perceived Najdi as the most dominant dialect in Saudi Arabia.

KEYWORDS

Sociolinguistics, language attitudes, perceptions, stereotype, evaluative profiles, Saudi Arabia

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1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia (SA) is a large country with diverse dialects. Recent research on dialects in SA has mostly focused on Saudi dialect production, which is studied through analysis of objective factors. Dialect production research in SA has investigated many linguistic aspects, such as the study of syntactic (e.g. Abu Mansour, 2011; Alzaidi, 2014), phonological (e.g. Al-Essa, 2009) or morphological aspects (e.g. Asiri, 2009) of some SA dialects. As the recent trend is to focus on dialect production research, dialect perceptions have been neglected. Few studies have investigated Saudis' perceptions towards their dialects, applying a language attitudes approach to tap into the subjective factors of language variation and changes in the region (Alahmadi, 2016; Al-Rojaie, 2020; Alrumaih, 2002).

Labov (1984) claims that one of the main purposes for sociolinguistic research is to construct a 'record of overt attitudes towards language, linguistic features and linguistic stereotypes' (p. 33). Thus, a language attitudes approach is fundamental to sociolinguistic research, as it informs the field about the direction of language variation and change. Furthermore, language attitude research is a very powerful tool for uncovering the ideological suppositions underlying the stereotypical assumptions that people hold towards their dialects (Bishop *et al.*, 2005; Garrett, 2010; Giles, 1970; Kristiansen *et al.*, 2005; Labov, 1972). It follows that language attitude research attempts to explain the reasons why certain stereotypes arise (Garrett, 2010).

Theoretically speaking, Kristiansen *et al.* (2005) put forward a tripartite model of language attitudes, consisting of cognition, affect and behaviour. The cognition component handles storing attitudes and beliefs about the external world within one's mental lexicon, even including the relationship between objects in the world. It follows that the stereotypical assumptions that people hold towards dialects are a result of stored beliefs in the cognitive system. The affect component controls people's emotional orientation towards the attitude object, which could be graded from favourable to unfavourable. Finally, the behaviour component is the outcome of the attitude itself, which can be measured and assessed.

The present study investigates Saudi attitudes towards Saudi dialects by using the direct approach proposed by Garrett *et al.* (2005a), in which participants are asked to jot down the first characteristics that come to their mind when dialect names are mentioned. Thus, the cognitive processes first work to reveal the stereotypical views SA people hold towards the main dialects in SA. Then, the cognitive processes work to sort and compare two attitudinal objects, i.e. dialects, as will be shown in the results section (see Section 6.1). Second, the affective component represents SA participants' feelings towards SA dialects, with some dialects being perceived positively and others negatively. The behavioural component will not be analysed, as it is beyond the scope of the present paper.

2. Language Attitude Research

Language attitude research has been widely applied to many languages and dialects and in many different contexts. Some of the studies aim to reveal attitudes towards a global language, such as English, in which the data are collected from native speakers of English from diverse locations around the world. Previous studies consistently confirm that British English, more specifically the Received Pronunciation (RP) accent, has always been perceived as having the highest number of characteristics associated with superiority and high status (Huygens and Vaughan, 1983; Stewart *et al.*, 1985). Later studies reveal that US English has surpassed UK English in terms of positive language attitude perceptions, as it has acquired a higher number of status-related characteristics than UK English (Bayard *et al.*, 2001; Garrett *et al.*, 2005b). Therefore, language attitude research is seen as a significant approach to revealing changes in attitudes, which could have serious implications for language variation and change.

Other researchers have focused on revealing attitudes towards English but from the perceptions of non-native speakers. Evans and Imai (2011) conducted a study on Japanese participants using a keyword technique to reveal their attitudes towards five main global

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varieties of English: UK, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Their study confirmed the findings of previous research. They concluded that Japanese attitudes could have a powerful influence on the pedagogical choices that might prioritise US English over UK English in the educational system. Therefore, studies on language attitudes are of great benefit to language planners. In a similar vein, Snodin and Young (2015) examined 251 Thai perceptions towards the main varieties of English. Their results suggested that Thai participants have a greater tendency to perceive US English as the model language over British English. Hence, they claim that language policy and planning in Thailand has to consider participants' attitudes to better understand the whole situation.

Another group of studies aimed to reveal attitudes towards regional varieties of one language within the same country. Bishop *et al.* (2005) compared two studies, which were conducted in the UK with a similar aim and methodology, to reveal people's stereotypes about different accents spoken in the UK. The first study was conducted by Giles (1970) and the second by the BBC (2005). Although there was a 35-year gap between the two studies, they came to similar conclusions: RP was rated the highest in terms of status among the English varieties spoken in the UK; however, they found that ethnic accents, such as Indian and Caribbean, were rated at the bottom of the status and attractiveness profiles. Bishop *et al.* (2005) justified the similar conclusions on the basis of the persistent ideology that people in the UK hold towards different UK accents. Thus, attitudes are essential in understanding how people's perceptions towards the world are driven by their ideology. Such an interpretation further enhances investigations of language variation and change.

In the following section, we will shed some light on the language attitudes research of Saudi dialects to better understand the revolution and direction of the research in the Saudi context.

3. Language Attitude Research in SA

As previously mentioned, in the context of SA, limited studies have investigated language attitudes. Alrumaih (2002) conducted a perceptual study on participants from the Central region of SA. Participants were provided with two characteristics on a semantic differential scale and were asked to rate the five main dialects in SA, along with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). Results revealed that Najdi participants, i.e. participants from the Central region, showed a high level of linguistic security in their own dialect compared to other SA dialects but a lower level of linguistic security compared to MSA. Though the study is one of the first language attitude research attempts in SA, it lacks preliminary research in which the characteristics are drawn from the participants themselves. Instead, Alrumaih (2002) adapted *correct* and *pleasant* characteristics from previous research carried out in Western contexts.

In a similar vein, Alahmadi (2016) conducted an attitudinal study on the Meccan dialect, which is a sub-dialect in the Western region. Results revealed that participants were highly positive about their dialect. However, the study did not give the participants the chance to express their feelings and attitudes about their dialects, as they were confined to certain attitudinal phrases. Therefore, the keyword technique would be useful in the context of SA dialect research to enable participants to freely express their attitudes towards SA dialects. The results could then be used in further research as evaluative profiles to be rated on a given scale. Recently, Al-Rojaie (2020) conducted a perceptual study on the Qassimi dialect (a sub-dialect in the Central region). The study explored the most associated evaluative profiles with the Qassimi dialect using the qualitative label technique, by which participants were asked to write labels, linguistic features and examples of the Qassimi dialect. The qualitative label technique is very similar to the keyword technique; the only difference between them is that the former was introduced to participants with a geographical map, while with the keyword technique, the dialect names are presented conceptually to participants. Though Al-Rojaie's (2020) study is pioneering in the field, it is limited to only one dialect in SA.

We think research on SA dialects is merited for three reasons: first, to reveal the overall stereotypical assumptions towards SA dialects; second, to understand the reasons that have enabled such stereotypes to emerge; and finally, to predict the direction of language variation and change in the region.

Given the need to investigate perceptions towards Saudi dialects, as they have not been studied before, two main research questions are asked in the present study:

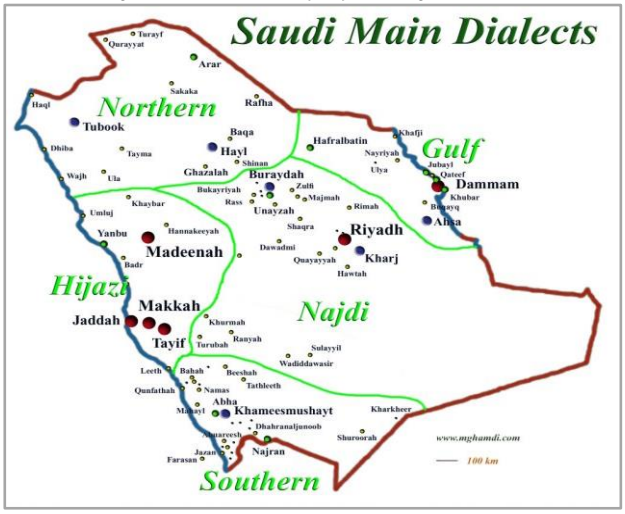
- **Q1**: What are the perceptions of Saudis towards the main Saudi dialects?
- **Q2**: What is the most dominant spoken dialect in SA?

Before discussing the methodological approach for the present study, we will provide some background information about dialects in SA.

4. The Background of Saudi Arabian Dialects

As mentioned in the introduction, SA is a large country with many diverse dialects. Ingham (1994) claims that there is a strong correlation between dialects and geographical location in SA. In other words, the dialect of speakers is geographically bound to their locations, and they are resistant to change when moving from their original place. In a similar vein, Aldarsoni (2011) observes that the main provinces in SA are distinguished by their dialects. He divided the Saudi dialects according to five regions in SA: the Northern region, the Southern region, the Western region, also called Al-Hijaz, the Eastern region and the Central region, also called Najd (see Figure 1). The present study will adapt Aldorsoni's (2011) taxonomy, which will investigate the aforementioned five main dialects.

Figure 1: Saudi Arabic dialect map adapted from Alghamdi (2020)



Externally, SA is a peninsula situated in the southwest of Asia and bordered by Iraq, Jordan and Kuwait in the north, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the east and Yemen and Oman in the south (see Figure 2. General authority for survey and geospatial information, n.d.). With such a variety of nations along the borders, differences among SA dialects are expected. Internally, many tribes are located in SA, and their customs and traditions are considered among the factors that shaped the dialects of the regions where these tribes settled (Prochazka, 1988).

Figure 2: Map of Saudi Arabia adapted from General Authority for Survey and Geospatial Information (n.d.)

The Northern region is the home of different tribes (Aldarsoni, 2011). Throughout history, they were known for their generosity. Geographically, the Northern region extends from Hail to the cities bordering Iraq and Jordan.

The Central region (Najd) is located in the heart of SA, having no contact with the external borders. Thus, when compared to the other regions, the Najd region has not been influenced by other dialects, as it stayed close to the original spoken dialect (Ingham, 1994). Historically, Najd has been recognised as the place where the first king of SA was crowned (Aloboudi, 2015). Furthermore, Najd was chosen as the location of the capital of SA, Riyadh.

The Western region includes two important cities (Makkah and Al-Madina), in which the two Holy Mosques are located. Annually, Muslims from all over the world, with their different languages and cultures, visit the Holy Mosques in Makkah and Al-Madina (Ochsenwald, 1984).

The Eastern region has been known as the oil industry region since it was first discovered in 1938. Such discovery led to the foundation of the American Saudi Company of Oil (Kultgen, 2014). Therefore, people in that area were among the first in SA to contact Americans and the British and to be exposed to Western languages and cultures (Anderson, 2014).

The Southern area is distinguished by its green fields and mountains and its rainy weather. Linguistically, some sub-dialects in the Southern region resemble the Yamani dialect in some morphological and phonological aspects (Asiri, 2009). Further evidence comes from Watson's (2014) study. She conducted a comparative study on the phonology, phonetics and morphology of Southern Arabic dialects, which included Yamani and Southwestern SA dialects, and on non-Arabic varieties that belong to the Semitic language family. She found significant resemblance between the Yamani and Southwestern SA dialects and the non-Arabic dialects in many linguistic aspects.

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants:

The participants were 78 Saudi citizens from different regions in SA: the Northern region (18 participants), the Southern region (9 participants), the Central region (14 participants), the Western region (21 participants) and the Eastern region (16 participants). The number of participants is considered small compared to the country's population. Though the questionnaire was distributed online, and there is a high probability of online questionnaires reaching a large number of participants, we speculate that the nature of the questions in the current study might have been sensitive for Saudis, preventing them from taking part in the study. We asked them to evaluate their dialect, which is part of their culture and identity, so there could be some level of hesitation to participate.

Regarding gender, 70 participants were female, and eight were male. It is obvious that we have encountered an issue of gender imbalance, as there were more females than males. We did not have any control over the recruitment of participants, as the sampling technique was random. With respect to age, the majority of participants (48) fell under the 35–44 age group; 22 participants were under 25–34. Relatively, the remaining two age groups, which are 18–24 and 55–64, were limited in number, 3 and 5, respectively. Participants were approached randomly via an online questionnaire using the Survey Monkey tool; therefore, their demographics were diverse.

5.2. Research Instrument:

An open-ended questionnaire, following a keyword technique, was designed as the main instrument in the study. The design has been widely used in the literature, and its efficiency has been proven. Previous studies used the keyword technique mainly on perceptions towards global varieties of English (i.e. Australian English, American English, UK English, etc.) rather than regional varieties of English within each country (Evans, 2010; Evans and Imai, 2011; Garrett *et al.,* 2005b; Snodin and Young, 2015). The present study focuses on the local varieties of Arabic in SA rather than on global varieties of the language. The questionnaire was distributed online using the Survey Monkey tool.

The questionnaire was divided into parts; the first part of the questionnaire is called the keyword technique, in which participants were asked to jot down the first impressions that came to mind when the following Saudi dialects were mentioned: Northern dialect, Southern dialect, Central dialect, Western dialect and Eastern dialect. Participants were asked to provide five of the top characteristics of each of the aforementioned dialects. The number of keywords or characteristics provided varied, as some participants wrote only one keyword, while others wrote more than that.

In the second part, the participants were asked to choose the dialect they think is the most dominant spoken one or choose 'other' and indicate why. The questionnaire was distributed in Arabic, the mother tongue of the participants, and they were asked to write their answers in Arabic as well. All answers were then translated and checked by a translator.

The keyword technique is part of the conceptual approach, which is a widely used approach in language attitude research. Previous research demonstrated the reliability of the conceptual approach for tapping into the overt stereotypical assumptions people hold towards their dialects (Bishop *et al.,* 2005; Garrett *et al.*, 2005a; Kristiansen *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, this approach was selected to reveal how language attitudes in SA could be driven by powerful stereotypical suppositions. Regarding the justification for using the keyword technique, it is important to note that the identification of language attitudes in SA has not been investigated before in the previously studied dialects; therefore, the keyword technique was selected, as it enables identification of salient language attitudes and people's orientation towards these attitudes (Garrett *et al.*, 2005a). Furthermore, the keyword technique has the power not only to provide an evaluative profile of the dialect but also to reveal vivid cognitive representations (Kristiansen *et al.*, 2005), such as cultural and geographical associations (see Section 7). Such associations can elicit rich stereotypical assumptions, along with the evaluative profiles in the data.

5.3. Data Analysis:

Content analysis has been used to analyse the data, which is a process that has been widely used alongside the keyword technique (Evans and Imai, 2011; Garrett *et al.*, 2005a, Garrett *et al.*, 2005b; Snodin and Young, 2015). Content analysis explores regularities and patterns in data, which can be clustered together to form coherent descriptive themes (Krippendorff, 2018). Hence, in the data for each dialect, some themes emerged which represent the most prominent evaluative profiles associated with each dialect. During the analysis process, certain considerations were made. First, participants' attitudes towards their own dialects were excluded from the analysis to increase the objectivity of the answers. Second, perceptions of in-groups are beyond the scope of the current research, as our main purpose is to identify the major attitudes towards out-groups and to understand the incentives behind them.

6. Results

Results will be presented in two parts following the order of the research questions mentioned in Section 2. In the first part, we will present Q1 results, and in the next part, we will present Q2 results.

6.1. Perceptions Towards Saudi Dialects:

After translating the responses, similar features in the data were grouped under one theme, and these themes were arranged in tables from the most to the least frequent. Eight descriptive themes, with a total of 532 tokens, emerged from the overall data: *affective positive* (201), *linguistic features* (152), *affective negative* (54), *awareness of language variation* (51), *cultural association* (30), *geographical association* (22), *tradition* (19) and *modernity* (3). *Linguistic features* included all the words that related to sound pronunciation and linguistic levels of speaking (Garrett *et al.*, 2005b). *Positive affective* included all the features that have a positive evaluation of the dialect. The *negative affective* theme included all the words that have a negative evaluation of the dialect. *Awareness of language variation* included all the words that implicate comparison of the dialect to other dialects or languages. *Cultural association* included all the non-evaluative words that are related to culture, and *geographical association* included all the responses with landmarks and geographical locations. Interestingly, all the emergent themes coincided with themes found in the literature on language attitudes (Evans and Imai, 2011; Garrett *et al.*, 2005b; Snodin and Young, 2015). On the one hand, it was evident that the emergent themes from one dialect could be observed in the data of another dialect. On the other hand, some themes were highly observable in the data of one dialect but were not evident at all in the data of another dialect. To sum up, the emergent themes were not consistent across dialect data, as shown in the following tables.

6.1.1. Characteristics Associated with the Northern Dialect

Table 1: Characteristics associated with the Northern dialect

Affective positive (55 responses)	Linguistic features (16 responses)	Tradition (14 responses)	Awareness of language variation (8 responses)	Cultural association (6 responses)
Generous (23)	Difficult to understand (7)	Bedouin (10 R)	Similar to Jordanian dialect (4)	Arabic coffee (2)
Moralistic (15)	Spoken with rising intonation (4)	Traditional (4 R)	Similar to Levant dialect (3)	Camel (1)
Noble (7)	Heavy accented (3)		Similar to Qassimi dialect (1)	Hunting (1)
Brave (3)	Easy (2)			Olives (1)
Beautiful (3)				Traditional Jordanian food (1)
Friendly (3)				
Attractive (1)				

Upon examination of the five descriptive themes presented in Table 1, *affective positive* received the most responses, with a total of 55. Furthermore, a more in-depth examination of the characteristics within the *affective positive* category indicates that the Northern dialect was most frequently evaluated as 'generous' (23 R), followed by 'moralistic', 'noble', 'brave', 'beautiful', 'friendly' and 'attractive'. The second most frequently rated theme, with 16 R, relates to the linguistic features of the Northern dialect. Within the *linguistic features* category, the characteristic 'difficult to understand' was the most frequently evaluated feature (7 R), followed by 'spoken with rising intonation', 'heavy accented' and 'easy dialect'. The third descriptive theme was *tradition*, with a total of 14 responses. Within this category, the most frequently evaluated characteristic was 'Bedouin' (10 R), followed by 'traditional' (4 R). The fourth perceived descriptive theme was *awareness of language variation* (8 R). Within this category, the most frequently evaluated characteristic was 'similar to the Jordanian dialect' (4 R), followed by 'similar to the Levant dialect' and 'similar to the Qassimi dialect'. Finally, the *cultural association* theme had the fewest number of responses (6 R); all keywords given in this category were not evaluative. The category included the following associations with an equally low number of responses (1 R for each): 'Arabic coffee', 'camel', 'hunting' and 'traditional food'.

6.1.2. Characteristics Associated with the Central/Najdi Dialect

Table 2: Characteristics associated with the Central dialect

Linguistic features (42 R)	Affective positive (37 R)	Affective negative (25 R)	Tradition (5 R)	Cultural association (5 R)	Geographical association (3 R)
Easy to understand (22)	Prestigious (15)	Arrogant (17)	History (3)	Allah Yaheek (3) 'May Allah greet you'	Najd (2)
White dialect (i.e. understandable) (6)	Confidence (6)	Flat/unemotional (7)	Original (2)	Poetry (2)	Riyadh (1)
Heavy accent (5)	Powerful (6)	Isolated (1)			
Spoken with rising intonation (5)	Generosity (4)				
Fast (2)	Intelligence (2)				
Spoken with high pitch (1)	Beautiful (2)				
/k/ sound is used as a variation for a couple of sounds (1)	Wise (2)				

Linguistic features received the most responses, with a total of (42 R). First, within the *linguistic features* category, the characteristic 'easy to understand' was the most frequently evaluated feature (22 R), followed by 'white dialect', 'spoken with rising intonation', 'heavy accent', 'fast', 'spoken with high pitch', and finally, /k/ *sound is used as a variation for a couple of sounds*'. Second, within the *affective positive* category (37 R), the Najdi dialect was most frequently evaluated as 'prestigious' (15 R), followed by 'powerful', 'confident', 'generous', 'intelligent', 'wise' and 'beautiful'. Third, the *affective negative* category received (25 R). Within the *affective negative* category, the characteristic 'arrogant' was the most frequently selected feature (17 R), followed by 'unemotional' and 'isolated'. Fourth, two characteristics emerged in the *tradition* category: history and tradition. Fifth, *cultural association* received a total of (5 R), which contained the words 'Allah yaheek', followed by 'poetry'. The sixth theme that emerged was *geographical association*, which received only (3 R).

6.1.3. Characteristics associated with the Western dialect

Table 3: Characteristics associated with the Western dialect

Affective positive (47 R)	Linguistic features (25R)	Awareness of language variation (11 R)	Cultural association (9 R)	Geographical association (4 R)	Affective negative (4 R)	Modernity (3 R)
Friendly (21)	Simple and easy (20)	Mixed dialects-diverse (7)	Traditional food (4)	Holy Mosques in Makkah and Madina (3)	Bad tempered (3)	Modern (3)
It's sound is soft and sweet (11)	Fast (3)	Similar to Egyptian dialect (4)	Ya wad (1) 'Oh, boy' Eshbak (2) 'What's wrong' Aboya (2) 'My father'	The sea (1)	Talkative (1)	
Open-minded (8)	Slow (1)					
Truthful (3)	/dj/ sound is de-affricated					
Social (3)						
Generous (1)						

The *affective positive* category received the most responses, a total of

47. A more in-depth examination of the characteristics within the *affective positive* category indicated that 'friendly' (21 R) was the most frequent response, followed by 'open', 'truthful', 'social' and 'generous'. The second most frequently rated theme (25 R) related to the *linguistic features* category, and the response 'easy and simple' was the most frequent, followed by 'fast', 'slow' and the de-affrication of [dj] sound. The third descriptive theme was *awareness of language variation*, with a total of (11 R) responses: 'mixed dialects' followed by 'close to Egyptian'. The fourth perceived descriptive theme was *cultural association* (9 R). Within this category, the most frequently evaluated characteristic was names of traditional food, such as 'foul'. Fifth, the *geographical association* and the *affective negative* themes received the same number of responses (4 R). Within *geographical association*, the most frequent response was 'close to the Holy Mosques', followed by 'the sea'. Within the *affective negative* theme, the most frequent response was 'bad tempered', followed by 'talkative'. Finally, the *modernity* category received (3 R), all for the characteristic 'modern'.

6.1.4. Characteristics associated with the Eastern dialect

Table 4: Characteristics associated with the Eastern dialect

Linguistic features (34 R)	Affective positive (28 R)	Awareness of language variation (26 R)	Geographical association (7 R)	Affective negative (3 R)	Cultural association (2 R)
Slow (15)	Quiet (9)	Close to Bahraini and other Gulf countries' dialects (26)	Aramco (4)	Weird (3)	Fishing (1) Traditional food (1)
Heavy accented (9)	Open-minded (8)		Alahassa (3)		
Difficult to understand (4)	Beautiful (7)				
Simple (3)	Generous (4)				
Lengthy sounds (3)					

Linguistic features received the most responses, with a total of 34. A more in-depth examination of the characteristics within the *linguistic features* category indicates that the Eastern dialect was most frequently evaluated as 'slow' (15 R), followed by 'heavy', 'difficult to understand', 'simple' and with 'lengthy sounds'. The second descriptive theme was the *affective positive* theme, with a total of 28 responses. Within this category, the most frequently evaluated characteristic was 'quietness', followed by 'open-minded', 'beautiful' and 'generous'. The third rated theme, with 26 R, related to the *awareness of language variation* category, and all the examples in this theme fell under one feature – 'closeness/similarity to Bahraini and other Gulf countries' dialects'. The fourth perceived descriptive theme was *geographical association* (7R). Within this category, the most frequently evaluated characteristics were 'Aramco' and 'Al Ahsa'. The fifth perceived descriptive theme was the *affective negative* theme, with 3 R, and all of them were 'weird'. Finally, *cultural association* had the smallest number with only 2 R; the perceived characteristics were 'traditional food' and 'fishing'.

6.1.5. Characteristics associated with the Southern dialect

Table 4: Characteristics associated with the Southern dialect

Linguistic features (35 responses)	Affective positive (34 responses)	Affective negative (22 responses)	Cultural association (8 responses)	Geographical association (8 responses)	Awareness of language variation (6 responses)
Difficult to understand (19)	Generous (8)	Uncultured (7)	Traditional food (6)	Mountain (3)	Similar to Yamani dialect (5)
Fast (12)	Noble (4)	Harsh (7)	Blessings (4)	Nice weather (3)	Similar to MSA (1)
Spoken with rising intonation (1)	Brave (4)	Annoying (3)		Landscape (2)	
Spoken with high pitch (1)	Friendly (4)	Close-minded (3)			
/ʃ/ sound is used as a variation for a couple of sounds (1)	Moralistic (4)	Arrogant (2)			
Spoken with assimilation (1)	Beautiful (4)				
	Punctual (3)				
	Decision maker (2)				
	Intelligent (1)				

Six descriptive themes emerged from the data on the Southern dialect. Two of the themes were not evaluative: *geographical* and *cultural associations*. Interestingly, the *linguistic features* theme had the highest number of responses (35 R). Within the category, two characteristics were frequently perceived: 'difficult to understand' and 'fast' (19 R and 12 R, respectively). The remaining linguistic features within the category received just one response each. The second descriptive theme was *affective positive* (34 R). Within the *affective positive* category, the most frequently evaluated characteristic was 'generous' (8 R). This was followed by 'noble', 'brave', 'friendly', 'moralistic', 'beautiful', 'punctual', 'decision maker', and finally, 'intelligent'. The third descriptive theme was *affective negative* (23 R). Within the *affective negative* category, the 'uncultured' and 'harsh' keywords each received 7 R. These were followed by 'annoying', 'close-minded' and 'arrogant'. The fourth descriptive theme was *cultural associations* (8 R), in which participants mentioned a couple of famous traditional foods in the region and a couple of famous blessing phrases. The fifth theme that emerged was *geographical associations* (8 R). Within the category, participants used geographical symbols as keywords: 'mountains', 'landscape' and 'nice weather'. The final theme that emerged was *awareness of language variation* (6 R). Within the theme, 'similar to Yamani dialect' received 5 R, while 'similar to MSA' only received 1 R.

6.2. The Most Dominant Spoken Dialect:

The second question of the survey was 'What do you think is the most dominant spoken dialect in Saudi Arabia?' The data showed that 68% (52) of the participants chose the 'Central region' dialect as the most common. However, 16% (12) of responses were given to the option 'other'; 4 of 12 answered that there will be a white dialect that will be understood by all people from all dialects, while the rest mentioned that there will be no common dialect and every region will keep its own dialect. The other dialects received few responses: 6% (5) for 'Southern dialect', 5% (4) for 'Eastern dialect', 4% (3) for 'Western dialect' and 1% (1) for 'Northern dialect'.

Table 5: Frequency of the perceived dominant dialect

	Central	Western	Eastern	Northern	Southern	Other	
						White dialect	Each has its own dialect
Total	68% (53)	4% (3)	5% (4)	1% (1)	6% (5)	5% (4)	10% (8)

7. Discussion

Regarding the first research question, the results revealed seven patterns. First, most dialects were evaluated as having characteristics within the *affective positive* theme; this was especially the case for Northern and Western dialects. Looking in more depth at the pattern, it was notable that the Northern dialect was frequently rated by participants as having 'generous' and 'moralistic' characteristics (23 and 15 responses, respectively); no other dialect received such a high number of responses for the aforementioned characteristics. Likewise, the Western dialect was evaluated as the friendliest dialect, with 21 responses. Second, comparing the results of the *linguistic features* category, on the one hand, the Southern dialect was perceived as the most difficult to understand and the fastest-sounding dialect. On the other hand, the Najdi and Western dialects were perceived as the easiest dialects to understand in SA. Regarding accents, the Eastern dialect was remarked upon as the dialect with the heaviest accent. Third, in the *awareness of language variation* category, all dialects were perceived as similar to their neighbouring dialects across SA borders, except for the Najdi dialect. In other words, there is no evidence showing a similarity between the Najdi dialect and any other dialect from outside SA. Most importantly, the Eastern dialect was perceived as the most similar dialect to its neighbour from the west, which is the Bahraini dialect (see the country of Bahrain in Figure 2). Fourth, the Najdi and Southern dialects were more frequently perceived as having characteristics within the *negative affective* category. The Najdi dialect was characterised as the most

arrogant, while the Southern dialect was observed as the most uncultured and harsh. Fifth, the *modernity* category emerged only in the Western and Eastern dialects, while the *tradition* category emerged only in the Najdi and Northern dialects. Sixth, the cultural association results indicated how traditional food, cultural activities and particular blessings were associated with the SA dialects and used as distinctive markers for them. Finally, the *geographical association* category revealed that the distinctive geographical location of some regions in SA impacted the perception of the dialects of these regions. In the following sections, we will explain the meaning of each pattern and how they fit into the wider literature.

As discussed in the introduction, the first part of the attitude structure is responsible for uncovering the stereotypical views that someone holds towards an object (Kristiansen *et al.*, 2005). The results uncovered that each dialect was stereotypically associated with a frequently perceived characteristic in each category. Furthermore, the second component of the attitude structure handles the degree to which attitudes are positive or negative (Kristiansen *et al.*, 2005). Thus, the results show that Saudis are positive about SA dialects in general, as the *affective positive* category responses outweigh those in the negative category. Remarkably, in the *positive affective* category, the Northern and Western dialects were very frequently characterised as generous and friendly, respectively. Two interpretations can be put forward for this finding. First, northerners have been famed for their hospitality throughout history. Therefore, stereotypically, their dialect is perceived in line with this characteristic. Second, regarding the Western dialect, the Western region is the most cosmopolitan in SA, as it has the two most Holy Mosques (Bianchi, 2004), which attract Muslims from around the globe. Therefore, it could be the cosmopolitan nature of the region that causes people from the area to be friendly and joyful, as they have the ability to welcome and coexist with Muslims from around the globe.

In the *linguistic features* category, first, the Southern dialect was characterised as the most difficult dialect to understand among other dialects in SA. One interpretation for this result is the resemblance between Southwestern SA dialects and the other Semitic non-Arabic languages. Watson (2014) justifies why the dialect is perceived as difficult to understand by Saudis who are non-native speakers of the Southern dialect. Second, the Najdi and Western dialects were perceived as the easiest to understand. It is important to note that the capital is located within Najd, which makes the region central to everyone and motivates settlement and migration to the region (Al-Gabbani, 1991). Therefore, the dialect is perceived as easy to understand, as most people have visited the region or been in contact with its inhabitants. Regarding the Western dialect, as previously mentioned, the region is a cosmopolitan one, and most Saudis have had previous contact with people from the Western region when they visited the Holy Mosque in Makkah or the Prophet Mosque (peace be upon him) in Madinah. Therefore, such frequent contact with speakers of the Western dialect has made the outsiders of Hijaz familiar with the dialect. Third, the perception of the Eastern accent as the heaviest could be due to close contact between Eastern people and Gulf people, particularly Bahraini people, as the latter is often characterised as having certain linguistic features, such as rounding (Alaodini, 2019).

In the *awareness of language variation* category, notably, dialects that have direct contact with neighbouring dialects from outside SA were perceived as similar to them. However, the Najdi dialect was not perceived as similar to any other dialect. This finding could be interpreted by considering Najd's geographical position (see the SA map in Figure 2). It is clear that Najd is in the heart of SA and does not share any borders with the outside world. Hence, the dialect is not influenced linguistically by dialects from outside SA (Ingham, 1994). Another interesting finding relates to the Hijazi dialect. Together with the perceived similarity between the dialect and its neighbouring dialect from the west, it was also perceived as a mixed dialect. As previously mentioned, the region is a rich linguistic environment, as it receives an annual influx of pilgrims each year. This has highly affected the dialect of Hijaz and made it into a blend of many dialects (Alahmadi, 2016).

The Najdi and Southern dialects were most frequently associated with stereotypes within the *affective negative* category. The Najdi dialect was perceived as the most arrogant dialect. This could be because the region is geographically not exposed to any external borders, unlike the other regions in SA. Further evidence comes from Alrumaih's (2002) study, which found that Najdi participants were highly linguistically secure, as they rated themselves as the most *correct* dialect among other Saudi dialects. This might be why people have this perception of this dialect. As for the Southern dialect, we do not have any firm justification for why the dialect was highly characterised as uncultured. However, one possible interpretation would be to consider the role of media, as suggested by Alabdali (2017). We observed that sarcastic Saudi TV series[1] mostly employ the Southern dialect for comic representation, which represents its people as naive and uncultured. This could be the reason why the Southern dialect has been perceived as such. Another possible interpretation might pertain to the late advance of higher education in the region, as the first university in the region was established in 1999, while universities in the Central, Western and Eastern regions were founded earlier. As a result, many people from the south used to move to other regions in SA to access higher education or to look for job opportunities.

Regarding the *modernity* and *tradition* categories, the characteristic of *modernity* emerged only in the Western and Eastern dialects. First, as previously mentioned, after the oil boom in SA and the advent of Aramco in the Eastern region (Kultgen, 2014), the region witnessed dramatic urbanisation, which also stereotypically affected the dialect. Second, as for the Western dialect, historically, many Muslims around the Islamic world settled in the region and maintained the urbanisation process and contributed to it as they brought their cultures with them, which contributed to modernising many aspects in the region. Regarding the *tradition* category, first, it could be that the Najdi dialect has conserved many of the traditional aspects in the Arabian Peninsula due to its closed location. Second, the Northern dialect has direct contact with the Jordanian Bedouins scattered along the borders shared by SA and Jordan. Bedouins are always characterised by their traditional conservatism (Al-Essa, 2009), and this could be why the Northern dialect is perceived as a traditional dialect.

In the *geographical location* category, the results indicate how the sense of place and landscape is present in the stereotypical views Saudis hold towards SA dialects. For example, the Southern region was perceived as having the most beautiful weather in SA and the most attractive landscape as well. Therefore, such features have been stereotypically attached to the Southern dialect. Also, the Western region is subject to distinctive geographical attention due to being the location of the two Holy Mosques. Hence, participants cited the names of the mosques once the dialect names were mentioned.

In the *cultural association* category, traditional food names were

[1] Examples of the most popular Saudi satirical TV series include *Mukhraj 7*/maxraʒ sabʕah/ and *Tash Matash*/tʿaːʃmaː tʿaːʃ/.

associated with all the relevant SA dialects. Such associations indicate how food is culturally represented in participants' cognition. Similarly, participants associated dialects with cultural activities, such as fishing and hunting. Finally, results revealed a connection between blessings and the dialect's image in participants' cognition, as some dialects were labelled with blessings, including *Allah ykharjna* 'May Allah save us' in the Southern dialect and *Allah Yaheek* 'May Allah greet you' in Najdi.

Regarding the second research question (What is the most dominant spoken dialect in SA?), the results revealed that the Central dialect (i.e. Najdi) was perceived by over 68% of participants as the most dominant spoken dialect. Compared to the Najdi dialect, the remaining dialects were mentioned only a few times as the most dominant spoken dialect. Two explanations can be put forward for this pattern. First, the Najd area gained political importance, as it is the Saudi royal family's hometown. Such political importance might be reflected in the dialect having a very powerful and dominant position among other SA dialects. Second, the Saudi media might have its own effects on how dialects are perceived in SA, since some popular satirical Saudi TV series often stereotype the different dialects in SA in a humorous style. However, the Najdi dialect is always represented as the norm or the most correct and prestigious dialect.

8. Conclusion

First, this study has provided a preliminary vivid picture of the stereotypes associated with dialect perceptions in SA. Second, the justifications underlying the emergence of certain stereotypes have been discussed. Third, the study revealed that participants had a moderate tendency to perceive the Najdi dialect as the most dominant spoken dialect in SA. This result might suggest that the Najdi dialect could lead to linguistic change in Saudi dialects; therefore, there could be some changes in the dialect in the future. Again, this study is considered groundwork for identifying attitudes towards main dialects in SA, and it reveals how Saudi language ideologies constructed these attitudes over time. In other words, it helps to explain what determines and defines Saudi attitudes towards their dialects. This paper undoubtedly contributes to local and global language attitude research. It paves the way for further attitudinal studies in the region, as the revealed keywords could be used as evaluative profiles in an attitudinal scale. Further studies with more participants or more males, as the majority of the participants of this study were females, might reveal more insights or different results. Further studies considering younger or older generations, as most of the participants of this study were between 35 and 44, might reveal different results because perceptions may differ over generations.

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