



## From Nablus to Gaza: Exploring the Structure and Identity of Palestinian Arabic

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**Abstract:** This article offers a comprehensive linguistic overview of the Palestinian dialect of Arabic, a major variety within the Levantine dialect group. The study examines its phonological system, morphological patterns, and syntactic structures, with a focus on authentic examples drawn from everyday speech. Special attention is given to the interaction between colloquial and formal Arabic in Palestinian usage, and to morphological features such as vowel shortening when suffixes are added to verb roots (e.g., baqūl → baqul-lak). In the final section, the article addresses a pressing issue in Arabic dialectology: the absence of a standardized grammar or writing system for Palestinian Arabic. The author proposes a foundational model for standardization based on central urban varieties, supported by corpus development and community-informed documentation. This approach



is intended to support future educational use and technological applications such as automatic translation and voice recognition.

**Keywords:** Palestinian Arabic, Levantine dialects, phonology, morphology, syntax, dialect standardization, diglossia, spoken Arabic, Arabic sociolinguistics, language teaching

The Palestinian dialect of Arabic, spoken across the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and among diaspora communities worldwide, represents a vibrant and linguistically rich branch of the Levantine Arabic group. As with many Arabic vernaculars, Palestinian Arabic has evolved organically through centuries of social, political, and cultural change — shaped by contact with languages such as Hebrew, English, and Turkish, and reflecting the complex identity of the Palestinian people.

Unlike Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is uniform and codified for official and literary use across the Arab world, Palestinian Arabic exists primarily in oral form and lacks a standardized grammar, spelling system, or unified teaching methodology. This presents challenges not only in language education and linguistic research, but also in digital applications such as automatic translation, voice recognition, and dialectal corpora.

This article aims to provide a systematic linguistic description of Palestinian Arabic, with particular focus on its phonological, morphological, and syntactic characteristics. Drawing from naturalistic examples of everyday speech, it highlights common usage patterns and structural tendencies that define the dialect. In the final section, the article addresses the problem of non-standardization, arguing that urban varieties—especially those of cities like Ramallah, Nablus, and Jerusalem—can provide a practical foundation for developing standardized reference materials. The phonology of Palestinian Arabic



shares many features with other Levantine dialects but also exhibits distinctive local traits. Palestinian Arabic preserves the majority of the consonants found in Classical Arabic, but some phonemes undergo regional variation:

- /q/ is commonly pronounced as [ʔ] (glottal stop) in urban centers:
  - qalb (“heart”) → ʔalb
- In rural and Bedouin varieties, /q/ may be retained or pronounced as [g]:
  - qalb → galb<sup>1</sup>
- /θ/ and /ð/ tend to merge with /t/ and /d/ in most sub-dialects:
  - thālitha → tālteh (“third”)
  - dhahab → dahab (“gold”)

A unique and productive feature in Palestinian Arabic is the shortening of long vowels when a verb stem is followed by a pronoun suffix. This is often a result of the consonant cluster that results from the attachment:

Base Verb Meaning With Suffix Meaning				Phonological Note
baqūl	I say	baqul-lak	I’ll say to you (m.)	/ū/ → /u/
bījīb	I bring	bijib-lak	I’ll bring you...	/ī/ → /i/
’aqūl	I will say	aqul-lak	I want to tell you	/ū/ → /u/

This phenomenon reflects a broader tendency in Palestinian Arabic to simplify clusters and reduce syllable weight when suffixes are added. Palestinian Arabic morphology, like other Arabic dialects, is rich and productive, balancing between inherited classical patterns and innovations driven by colloquial usage. It features a streamlined verbal system, reduced case marking, and an extensive use of prefixes and suffixes that

<sup>1</sup>Al-Deaibes (Phonological aspects of Jordanian Bedouin Arabic)



modify core meanings with efficiency and clarity. This section focuses on three key morphological domains: verb structure, personal pronouns and clitics, and modal constructions.

The verb system in Palestinian Arabic is simpler than that of Classical Arabic. Verbs are primarily marked for tense/aspect (past and imperfect), subject, and occasionally mood or modality. Below are examples from Form I (basic stem), using the root rūḥ<sup>2</sup> (to go):

**Person Past (Perfect) Present (Imperfect)**

'ana	rūḥt	barūḥ
'inta	rūḥt	bitrūḥ
'inti	rūḥti	bitrūḥi
huwwe	rāḥ	birūḥ
hiyye	rāḥit	bitrūḥ
'ihna	rūḥna	bnirūḥ
'intu	rūḥtu	bitrūḥu
humme	rūḥu	birūḥu

Notice the use of:

- Prefix: b-, bi- for the present tense
- Stem: Modified for gender and number
- Suffixes: Reflecting subject agreement in past tense

<sup>2</sup> Erwin Tschirner, Karin C. Ryding. Palestinian Colloquial Arabic: A Course in Spoken Arabic. Dunwoody Press, 2004.



Palestinian Arabic heavily uses suffixes to express possession, object pronouns, and indirect references. These suffixes are attached to nouns, prepositions, and even verbs.

### Base Word With Suffix Meaning

bēt	bētak	your (m.) house
biddī	biddī 'iyyāk	I want you
'a'ūl	'aql-lak	I tell you
jīb	bijib-lak	I bring you

As mentioned in the previous section, the addition of suffixes can cause vowel shortening due to consonant clustering:

- baqūl → baql-lak
- bījīb → bijib-lak

This is a productive and predictable process in the dialect. A hallmark of Levantine dialects, especially Palestinian Arabic, is the frequent use of “biddī” (I want) to express desire or intention. It behaves like a pseudo-verb:

Expression	Translation
biddī arūḥ	I want to go
biddak tākul?	Do you want to eat?
biddī 'aql-lak	I want to tell you
lāzim arūḥ	I must go
ḥābīb a' rā al-Qur'ān	I'd love to read the Qur'an



These modal constructions are always followed by an imperfect verb (present/future form), making them analytic rather than inflected. The richness of Palestinian Arabic morphology feeds directly into its syntactic flexibility. Word order is not fixed, and cliticized elements often determine grammatical relations. In the next section, we explore sentence types, negation, and the use of prepositions.

Palestinian Arabic syntax is flexible and pragmatically driven. While influenced by the underlying structure of Classical Arabic, it has diverged significantly in terms of word order, negation patterns, and the frequent use of clitics and particles. In this section, we focus on three core syntactic phenomena: word order, negation, and use of prepositions and imperatives.

Palestinian Arabic alternates between verb–subject–object (VSO) and subject–verb–object (SVO) word orders, depending on context and emphasis.

- VSO (more neutral, default for intransitive/transitive sentences):
  - rāḥ 'il-walad 'a-l-madrise

“The boy went to school.”

- SVO (used for emphasis or with topicalized subjects):
  - 'il-walad rāḥ 'a-l-madrise

“The boy went to school.”

Both structures are grammatically valid. The subject may come before or after the verb depending on the speaker’s intention and discourse context.

Palestinian Arabic frequently omits the subject pronoun when the verb conjugation makes it clear:



- biddī arūḥ – “I want to go”
- bitrūḥ ‘a-l-madrashah? – “Are you going to school?”

However, pronouns may be retained for emphasis:

- ‘ana biddī arūḥ! – “I want to go!”

Clitic subject pronouns and object suffixes are often attached to verbs or particles:

- ba’ūl-lak – “I tell you”
- bajjib-lak – “I’ll bring you”

Negation in Palestinian Arabic typically uses the ma...-sh construction, although the -sh suffix is optional in some regions:

birūḥ – he goes	ma birūḥ-sh – he doesn’t go
bti‘raf – you know	ma bti‘raf-sh – you don’t know
‘indak fīlūs – you have money	ma ‘indak-sh fīlūs – you don’t have money

The suffix “-sh” is derived from the classical negative particle “šay”, and has become a standard negation marker in many Palestinian and urban Levantine dialects. In fast speech or certain regions, “-sh” may be dropped, especially when the context is clear:

- ma biddak rūḥ? – Don’t you want to go?

The same pattern is applied to the past tense:

- kānat hon – She was here
- ma kānat-sh hon – She wasn’t here



When used with pronominal suffixes or enclitics, the negation still wraps around the verb:

- ma šuft-ak-sh – I didn't see you

#### Person Affirmative Translation      Negative Translation

3rd pl	jābū	they brought	ma jābūš they didn't bring
2nd sg f	jibti	you (f.) brought	ma jibtiš you didn't bring

#### Transcription (Latin script):

– wēn kunt 'awwal 'embereḥ?

– ma kunt-esh fi-l-bēt, kunt fi Ḥēfa.

– 'aḥūy Fāḥim šāfak, u-mart-o kamān šāfatak. hiyye kamān kānat fi Ḥēfa. kānat bidd-ha tzūr aṣḥāb.

– u-'intu wēn kuntu fi nafs il-wa't?

– ma kunna fi-l-bēt!

#### Translation:

– Where were you the day before yesterday?

– I wasn't at home, I was in Haifa.

– My brother Fahim saw you, and his wife saw you too. She was in Haifa as well. She wanted to visit friends.





– And where were you all at that time?

– We were at home!<sup>3</sup>

### Analysis:

- ma kunt-esh – clear instance of past negation with –sh
- ma kunna – plural form without –sh, commonly dropped with pronouns in fast speech
- kānat bidd-ha tzūr aṣḥāb – shows modal construction + infinitive verb
- Word order varies naturally between VSO and SVO depending on topicalization

This dialogue is ideal for demonstrating natural syntax, negation, and conversational rhythm in Palestinian Arabic. One of the characteristic features of Palestinian Arabic is how phonology interacts with morphology—especially when suffixes or clitics are added to words ending in short vowels or consonants. This phenomenon affects both pronoun attachment and negation structures.

### a. Suffixes and Stress Shift

Words ending in short vowels like -a, -i, or -u are typically unstressed in isolation. However, when suffixes are added—such as personal pronouns or the negative particle –š—the syllabic structure changes. The final syllable becomes stressed and lengthened, sometimes involving vowel shortening or assimilation.

### Examples:

- ba'ūl (I say) → ba'ullak (I say to you)

<sup>3</sup> J. Elihay - English translation: Carol Sutherland, Susan Fogg «Speaking Arabic: A Course in Conversational Eastern (Palestinian) Arabic» Book 1, Second edition, Minerva Publishing House



(ū → u, stress shifts)

- bijīb (he brings) → bijīblik (he brings you [f.])

(ī → i)

### b. Spatial Prepositions + Pronoun Suffixes

Words such as quddām (“in front of”) and wara / ward (“behind”) attach directly to pronominal suffixes without prepositions:

Base	+ Pronoun	Meaning
quddām	quddāmi	in front of me
wara	warāya / wardi	behind me
quddāmak		in front of you (m.)
warāk		behind you (m.)
quddāmna		in front of us
warāhom		behind them

Suffixes:

- -i, -ak, -ek, -o, -ha, -na, -kom (–ku), -hom (–hen)

Note: The forms ward and wara are regionally variable, and vowel reduction may occur in rapid speech.

### c. Summary of Observations:



- Final unstressed vowels in words (e.g., ba'ūl, bijīb) tend to shorten and shift stress when a suffix is added.
- The addition of clitics like -lak, -lo, -li, or the negative particle –š alters the word's prosody and sometimes the vowel quality.
- Spatial prepositions such as quddām and wara attach directly to object pronouns without intervening prepositions, forming one phonological unit<sup>4</sup>.

Lexicon in Palestinian Arabic (PA) reflects a dynamic interplay between inherited Semitic vocabulary, regional variation, and lexical borrowing—especially from English, Hebrew, Turkish, and French. This section highlights characteristic lexical features, including regional terms, sociolinguistic markers, and common borrowings. While much of the vocabulary in PA overlaps with other Levantine dialects, there are numerous terms unique to Palestinian speech or pronounced with distinctly Palestinian phonetic features.

#### English Palestinian Arabic MSA Equivalent

now	halla' / hassah	الآن
a lot	ktīr / ktīr	كثير
how much	addēš	كم
child	walad, šabī	طفل
man	zalame	رجل
woman	mara	امراة

Some words have emotional or social nuance:

<sup>4</sup>Maha Abdel-Fattah, Spoken Arabic (Palestinian Dialect) Georgetown University Press.



- ḥabīb-albi – my dear (lit. love of my heart)
- yā zalame! – hey man! (used colloquially, often expressing surprise or frustration)

Palestinian Arabic is not homogeneous. Cities like Hebron, Jerusalem, Gaza, Nablus, and Haifa show lexical differences, influenced by both geography and contact with other cultures.

#### Concept Urban Dialect (Jerusalem) Rural / Southern (Hebron, Negev)

girl	bint	ṣabiyyah
slippers	šibšib	blāgha
bread	khubz	ēš

Palestinian Arabic has absorbed numerous loanwords, especially from:

#### a) English (via globalization, media, technology):

- ṭāwla – table (from Italian/French originally, used widely)
- battarīyah – battery
- lābtōb – laptop
- fīlm – film
- ṭab‘an – of course (reinforced via media use)

#### b) Hebrew (especially among Palestinian citizens of Israel):

- beseder – (בסדר)okay
- mašū – (משהו)something
- taḥanah – station (Hebrew: תחנה)



**c) Turkish & older borrowings:**

- afandī – sir, gentleman
- odah – room (oda in Turkish)
- bāšā – pasha
- şanta – çanta
- kawāfēr – kuaför (from French)

**d) French (rare, often via Lebanon):**

- garson – waiter
- sanduk – box (\*from French “caisse” via Turkish)

Palestinian youth, especially in urban centers like Ramallah or Jerusalem, frequently invent slang or shift meanings:

- ʿibtifraj ʿala serialāt – I’m binge-watching series
- şaḥteh! – (lit. health!) = expression after a good meal
- ḥurriyyeh! – freedom! (often used symbolically or politically)

Palestinian Arabic is lexically rich and reflects a history of contact, colonization, and resistance. Loanwords from English and Hebrew are especially noticeable in modern urban areas. Rural areas tend to preserve more Classical Arabic words, often with phonological change. Lexical choice can function as a marker of identity, distinguishing urban, rural, and refugee populations. One of the central linguistic challenges in the Arab world is the lack of full mutual intelligibility among speakers of different regional dialects, especially when geographical and socio-political distances are large. While all Arabic dialects descend from Classical Arabic, they have evolved significantly and unevenly. Palestinian Arabic (PA), though part of the Levantine group, has both shared features and unique ones that may



affect communication with speakers of other dialects, especially North African or Gulf varieties.<sup>5</sup>

• **Palestinian Arabic** **Meaning** **Possible Confusion**

zalame	man	unfamiliar in Gulf or Maghreb
bidd-i rūḥ	I want to go urīd an adhhab (MSA) or abgha arūḥ (Gulf)	
ḥāfla	bus (in PA)	ṭānā (in Morocco)

To improve mutual intelligibility we can encourage dialect awareness in education (e.g., exposure to Levantine, Gulf, Maghrebi speech), promote subtitled media and dialect dictionaries, develop AI tools (speech recognition, machine translation) tailored to dialectal Arabic, foster interdialectal dialogue through cultural exchange and collaborative media

Palestinian Arabic offers a rich example of how regional dialects preserve linguistic heritage, reflect social identity, and adapt to modern realities. Through our examination of its phonetics, morphology, negation patterns, vocabulary, and lexical borrowings, we see both the internal complexity of the dialect and its role within the broader context of Arabic dialectology.

At the same time, challenges in mutual intelligibility highlight the importance of understanding dialects not only as local forms of speech, but as active participants in cultural and political discourse. By studying Palestinian Arabic in depth, we gain insight into the linguistic diversity and unity of the Arab world, and we reaffirm the importance of

<sup>5</sup> Brustad, Kristen. (2000). *The Syntax of Spoken Arabic: A Comparative Study of Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian, and Kuwaiti Dialects*. Georgetown University Press.



dialectal literacy, technological tools, and inclusive education in strengthening communication across the region.

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