

## Measure Terms in Rural Jordanian Spoken Arabic

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**Abstract:** *The use of measure terms can be socially and culturally determined, as every speech society may have its own unique measure terms. This study aims to shed light on the sociolinguistic usage of measure terms in Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA). The researcher collected the data from everyday conversations in the rural dialect of the north of Jordan. The participants of the study were 15 men and women who were in their fifties and sixties. The ethnography of communication and Interactional Sociolinguistic (IS) approaches are adopted as the theoretical framework for this study. The study concluded that measure terms in JSA are culturally and socially inherited and transmitted, and Jordanians tend to use body parts (i.e. finger, hand, foot and leg related expressions) as measure terms for heights, lengths and weights.*

**Keywords:** Interactional Sociolinguistic, ethnography of communication, measure terms, Jordanian Spoken Arabic.

### 1. Introduction

It is overwhelmingly agreed that language is a social phenomenon, and there is a mutual relationship between language and society (Hymes 1964, 1974; Labov 1966, 1972; Gumperz 1971; Halliday 1971; Trudgill 1983,2006; Hudson 1990; Holmes 2006; Meyerhoff 2006). People use language not only to understand each others' feelings and thoughts, but also to define the relationship among others, as language is the main means of communication between people. The language used by men is different from that used by women, and that used by children is different from that employed by the elderly people. Therefore, "these aspects of language use serve as an emblematic function: they identify the speaker as belonging to a particular group or having a particular social identity" (Guy 1988:37). Guy (1988:79) argues that there are two peculiar reasons for viewing the study of linguistic production as the study of speakers: the first is psychological which occurs in our 'individualistic culture', since 'language production is a form of behavior' i.e. grammatical knowledge and intellectual capabilities. The second occurs in linguistics itself, as linguistics studies the grammars, which is liable for production, in the mind of the speakers.

Sociolinguistics encompasses a broad area of research, as sociolinguistics focuses on how interlocutors use language in social settings. Therefore, it concerns with who says what, to whom, when and

where, in what manner, and under what social circumstances. Sociolinguistics also encompasses the study of identity, class, solidarity, power, status and gender. In addition, sociolinguistics describes different ways of studying language; and sociolinguists employ "different methods for collecting and analyzing data" (Meyerhoff 2006:1). According to sociolinguists, people acquire language by a social process rather than a cognitive one (Pinto 2012). That is, speakers learn language from the social environment s/he raises in through different social events (Meyerhoff 2006). For example, speakers learn communication skills from the surrounding environment or the society i.e. what to say in sad or happy situations.

Halliday (2007a) elucidates the notion of a social man i.e. the individual in his social environment. Language is the main channel of communication between individuals in any speech community, by which an individual learns the values, the norms, the beliefs and the culture of the society where s/he lives. These intriguing issues cannot be learned at schools as the individual learns them independently by different events s/he encounters in his or her society. In addition, there is a strong relationship between language and the 'social man' (Halliday 2007b). Halliday (2007b) also illustrates that a society consists of relations rather than participants, and these relations define the social roles; an individual can occupy many roles at a time. In addition, the purpose of language is to communicate information within the members of a certain society; the members of the society do not use the language in the way they please, as meaning is controlled by a certain social norms specific for every speech community (Sanchez 2007).

Trudgill (1983:14) demonstrates two peculiar aspects of language behavior: "first, the function of language in establishing social relationships and second the role play by language in conveying information about the speakers." Besides, language is governed by the social norms, values and structures of a certain society, as "social structure may either influence or determine linguistic structure and/or behaviour" (Wardhaugh 1998:10-11). In other words, the linguistic varieties, words or styles individuals use to communicate reflect their regional, social and ethnic origin and sometimes their gender. Wardhaugh (1998: 10-11) also explains that "language and society may influence each other". That is, language and society are concatenated, and they have reciprocal influence on the use of language in certain social settings, since the choice of varieties, words and linguistics styles are sometimes governed by the social norms of a certain society.

Ethnography literally means 'a portrait of a people'. Harris and Johnson (2000:4) posited that "an ethnography is a written description of a particular culture- the customs, beliefs, and behaviours-based on information collected through fieldwork"Ethnography of communication is concerned with linguistics as it describes and analyzes language codes (Saville-Troike 2003). According to Saville-Troike (2003:1), "the uses of language and speech in different societies have patterns in their own which are worthy of ethnographic description comparable to – and intersecting with–patterns in social organization and other cultural domains." To illustrate, every speech society has its own dialects and social norms of using language in certain social settings. In addition, the use of language portrays the cultural norms of those societies. This is why we have cultural-specific terms which are employed within a certain culture not another; they can be effortlessly understood among the speakers of that culture only.

Therefore, there is a strong correlation between culture and language; studying language means studying the social and cultural norms of its speakers so that we can comprehend the different uses of language in various social settings. Haugen (1966) explains that *language* and *dialect* are ambiguous terms; ordinary speakers use them interchangeably when talking about different linguistic situations:<sup>(1)</sup> "*Language* can be used to refer to either a single linguistic norm or to a group of related norms, and *dialect* to refer to one of the norms; but themselves are not static"(Wardhaugh 1986:25).As a way of illustration, language is codified in books and dictionaries, and is standardized i.e. it can be the official language of the state, court and education while the dialect is not.

Jordan, an Arab country, is located in the Middle East; 97% of the population of Jordan are Muslims, while 3% are Christians. Standard Arabic (SA) is the official language of the state; it is the language of courts, education and media. Jordanian Spoken Arabic (JSA) is a variety of SA with some phonological and syntactic differences. There are three main distinguished dialects of JSA namely; rural dialect, spoken in the north parts of Jordan, especially towns and villages; urbanized dialect, spoken in the major cities of Jordan i.e. Amman, Irbid and Zarqa, and bedouin dialect, spoken in the eastern and southern cities of Jordan such as Mafraq, Karak, Tafielah, Ma'an and Aqaba. This study concerns with the rural dialect, especially the dialect spoken in the towns and villages of Irbid City.

The use of dialect can be favorable in different social settings for affective reasons, as speakers can use dialect to express their ordinary or

actual feelings towards certain issues during conversation. This study is significant and original as it is the first that tackles this peculiar issue in JSA. It also shows the relationship between language, culture and society, as Jordanian speakers tend to use familiar expressions derived from their usual conversations as measure terms.

Several intriguing sociolinguistics phenomena have not been researched in JSA such as the employment of measure terms that is a fascinating phenomenon. Every speech society has its own linguistic repertoires to express different linguistics terms such as measure terms. In JSA, speakers use socially and culturally specific words to refer to measure terms. This supports the assumption of Wardhaugh (1998) that language and society may influence each other. This study supports the notion that language and society can affect each other.

This study aims at studying measure terms as a linguistics production of Jordanian speakers from social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. These terms are distinguished and they are still used especially by the elderly people in the north of Jordan. However, younger generations may not understand these terms because of urbanization and education, as the majority of these terms are not available in SA, and they are regarded as old-fashioned terms nowadays. The study focuses on the measure terms and their collocations i.e. certain measure terms collocate only with specific heights and weights.

## **2. Study questions**

Since one of the significant aims of sociolinguistics is to study, how and why interlocutors use language to describe different social settings. This paper is designed to study the sociolinguistics usage of measure terms in JSA. This study tries to answer the following questions:

1. How do Jordanians express measure terms?
2. Are measure terms in Jordanian Spoken Arabic socially and culturally inherited and transmitted?

## **3. Theoretical framework**

Theoretical framework is the backbone for any study on linguistics phenomenon. This study describes the measure terms used in Jordanian society. Therefore, the theoretical framework draws on Ethnography of Communication, Discourse Analysis, and Interactional Sociolinguistics (IS) which "is an approach to discourse analysis that has its origin in the search for replicable methods of qualitative analysis that account for our ability to interpret what participants intend to convey in everyday communicative practice." (Gumperz 2001:215). This study concentrates

on units of interaction employed by the participants during speech events, as these units can reflect the values and the beliefs of Jordanian society.

#### **4. Methodology**

The participants of the current study were 15 men and women in their fifties and sixties in the north of Jordan. The researcher informed them about the purpose of the study in order to know the exact measure terms they use, when they refer to weights and heights in different social settings. The researcher observed and quoted the sentences that express measure terms during the conversation. The researcher draws on the discourse analysis, ethnography of communication and Interactional Sociolinguistics approaches in analyzing the collected data. The researcher rests on his observations, linguistics, and social experiences. The measure terms were classified into terms used for amounts (small vs. large; liquid vs. solid), and terms used for weights and heights.

#### **5. Results and discussion**

Measure terms are employed in every speech community, there are standard measure terms that are globally agreed upon, and this is not the target of the current study. These terms are well known by all the members of speech communities such as, gram, kilogram, millimetre, centimetre, meter, yard, mile, etc. However, there are some specific measure terms used exclusively by certain members of a society. For instance, measure terms in JSA are socially and culturally inherited, and transmitted from one generation to another. These terms have been used for many years; they can be classified into two categories: terms used for amounts i.e. solid and liquid (large and small) amounts, and terms used for heights and lengths. Moreover, they can be grouped into finger, hand, arm, foot and leg related expressions.

##### **5.1. Measure terms used for amounts**

In Jordanian society, people have their own special terms, words or expressions to express measure terms referring to amounts, some of these terms are lexicalized in Standard Arabic, while the majority are only used in JSA i.e. they are culture-specific terms, as they are only employed and understood by the speakers of Jordanian Arabic. Jordanians tend to employ finger related expressions as measure terms to refer to small amount of things, especially amounts used for preparing food such as salt, spices, etc. These amounts can be measured by the amount that can be held by the forefinger and the thumb. Other native speakers of Arabic may not comprehend these terms. There are two taxonomies of measure

terms, which Jordanians employ when referring to solid and liquid amounts.

### 5.1.1. Measure terms used for small amounts (solid and liquid items)

#### A. Finger related expressions

Jordanians use fingers as measurable tools to refer to small amounts of solid items such as salt, pepper and spices in general. These amounts can be hold by both the forefinger and the thumb; it refers to small but enough amounts. It is hard to find out how many grams these amounts are; both participants are fully aware of these quantities, because of the shared knowledge between them. The following terms are synonyms, and they are used interchangeably to refer to the same quantity:

*kathā* , *rashshi* , *gu mi* , *nitfi* , *giz<sup>c</sup>a* /*gabṣi* and *nug a* (drop).

(1). *Hu i kathit/ gabṣit/ giz<sup>c</sup>it / rasshit/gu mit/ nitfit milih*<sup>(2)</sup>.

'Give me a pinch of salt.'

*kathā/giz<sup>c</sup>a/gabṣi/rashshi/gu mi/nitfi milih* are the cooking measurements in JSA; they seem synonymous; they mean a pinch of salt, a small amount that can be hold by the forefinger and the thumb. A small amount that is just as a flavour enhancer or an amount that makes the taste of food acceptable i.e. the taste is moderate. However, *gu mi* , *nitfi* , *giz<sup>c</sup>a* are smaller than *kathā*, *rashshi* and *gabṣi*, as they may mean smidgen, where a smidgen equals ½ a pinch or 1/32 teaspoon; a pinch holds ½ a dash or 1/16 teaspoon; a dash holds 1/8 teaspoon, 8 dashes equal a teaspoon. A drop (*nug a*) is used only with liquid items such as oil, it may equal 1/64 teaspoon<sup>(3)</sup>.

Understanding what amounts to be added depends on the mutual relationship and the shared knowledge between the interlocutors, especially the intimacy. To illustrate, the interlocutors are usually a mother and her daughter, and both of them recognize the amount of salt or species that should be added to each dish. Therefore, both of them are fully aware of these amounts, and the addressee uses exactly the suitable amount of something. Based on this assumption, these terms are socially and culturally contextualized, so we can consider them as cultural-specific measure terms. Noticeably, they are mainly used by the elderly people who live in rural areas in the northern provinces of Jordan. However, nobody can foretell how many grams *kathā* equals, but it is semantically, culturally and socially known as a small but enough amount. Jordanians who live in cities rather than those who live in rural areas employ *rashshi*. *Rashi* and *nitfi* are also used with liquid items such as *rashshit/ nitfit/nug it zeit* (a small amount of oil).

## B. Hand related measure terms/ Solid items

### 1. *i<sup>c</sup>ra:m* اعرام /malat <sup>?</sup>Iydak ملات ايدك /gabda قبضة/ hafni حفنة

These terms are measured by using one hand or both hands. They are generally used to refer to solid amounts of things, countable and uncountable. Although these measure terms are synonyms, *hafnih* is used to refer to the amounts of both hands in JSA, it may equal a cup of something, about 200grams. However, in Standard Arabic, it means a handful. *Hafnit tra:b* (a handful of soil) is a very popular collocation. These terms are utilized with solid items to refer to bigger amounts than the aforementioned ones. *hafni* and *milu ilyad* ملء اليد, about half a cup or 100 grams, are Standard Arabic terms, while *i<sup>c</sup>ra:m* is colloquial. There are no specific weights for these amounts as the size of the hand is different from one person to another. These terms are usually employed with legumes and grains such as lentils, beans, peanuts, etc.

(2). *i<sup>c</sup> i:ni* Iqram/ malat Iydik / *hafnit* <sup>c</sup>adas.

'Give me a handful of lentils.'

We can make approximate weights for *i<sup>c</sup>ra:m/malat Iydik /hafnih* as half a cup or about 100 grams. Still these approximation is not specific, as the amount may be more or less than 100grams, but it is known for Jordanians, as both participants mutually understand the exact amount.

### 2. Kamshi كمشة (a fist or cupped hand of something)

*Kamshi* is measured by the fist of one's hand, *kamshi* may equal a cup, and it refers to an amount that one hand can hold when the fingers are clenched. However, in English, it is used as an informal unit of distance equals approximately to the hand (10 centimetres or 4 inches)<sup>(4)</sup>, it is employed to refer to certain solid items, countable and uncountable. It is also employed with peanuts, legumes and candies, when someone offers someone candies or peanuts, especially when these items are contained in a bag or in a can.

(3). Khudhlak kamshit *h*ilu:

'Take a fist of candies'

In this example, *kamshit* (the /t/ sound is added here and in other examples when compounding) refers to small amount that one can hold when fingers are included. It is also used in everyday conversations to refer to sarcasm or to debase someone. For example, when someone describes the childish or the strange behaviour of someone especially a child, s/he may say sarcastically "*gad ilkamshi, w ma hada gadirluh*" (He is a very little child and no one can control him). Metaphorically, it means that the child is still too little to behave in this way. Also, it can be used as

an insult for someone, especially when two men are arguing with each other, one of them may say to the other "*kullak gad ilkamshi*" (Pragmatically, you are nothing). In addition, it is employed as a verb, especially when someone is chasing a child who did something wrong, s/he says "*kamshtak*" (I caught you).

### 5.1.2. Measure terms used for large amount (leafy plants).

Jordanians also use specific measurable terms to refer to large amounts of leafy plants. They tend to measure these items by both arms and by the small spans of both hands when are closed to each other forming a circle. Consider the following terms:

#### A. *dhumma* ضمة (a bunch)

It is measured by the small spans of both hands when they are closed to each other forming a circle. This term is utilized with flowers, leafy plants such as mint, spring onion, etc. It cannot be used for large amounts. It is employed widely in Jordanian society, especially in vegetables and fruits market, as they sell these items by a bunch rather than by a kilogram.

(4).  $a^c$  i:ni dhumit bagdu:nis.

'Give me a bunch of parsley.'

The reason behind using this term may go back to the fact that these amounts are lightweight.

#### B. ${}^c$ abtah عبطة / Arm related expression

This measure unit is measured by the capacity of an adult both arms. This term is used to refer to a large amount of something such as plants, wheat, malt and other corps, it is larger than *dhumma*; Jordanian speakers clearly differentiate between the two terms. It is somehow impossible to guess the weight of  ${}^c$ ab a. However, it is socially well-known between the interlocutors.

(5).  $A^c$  i:ni  ${}^c$ ab it Molokhiyeh.

'Give me a package of Jews' mallow'.

The listener of this sentence recognizes the amount of Jews Mallow that the speaker wants; s/he will not give him/her *dhummah* (a bunch) for example. As mentioned above, JSA has its own distinguished measure terms for small and large amounts of liquid and solid items.



## 5.2. Measure terms used for lengths and heights

Jordanians use different measure terms to refer to lengths, widths and heights. These terms can be classified into finger, hand, arm and leg related expressions. These terms have been ordered upwardly.

### 3.2.1. Finger related measure terms

Again, Jordanians use finger related measure terms to express lengths and heights. These measure terms are socially acceptable, and they employed by elderly people and the people in the rural areas. The use of these terms went back to the early period of the twentieth century. During this period, the use of modern measure units such as metre was not known or unpopular. Therefore, Jordanians tend to use their body organs as measure terms.

#### A. *ʔisba*<sup>c</sup> (A finger)

A term used to refer to the shortest length and height in JSA. A traditional unit of distance equal to 2 nails or 4.5 inches (11.43 centimetres)<sup>(5)</sup>. It is usually utilized to emphasize on the shortness of something. This term is used as a cooking measure term, especially to refer to the amount of water that should be added to prepare a certain dish. It is also used for exaggeration or sarcasm about the length or the height of something or someone.

(6). Howa u:l *ʔisbi*<sup>c</sup>i, ʔaw ma *ħada* gadrluh

'Lit. He is a finger length and nobody can overcome him.'

This sentence denotes sarcasm about the height of the intended person; it is a kind of debasing him. That is, he is very short and rowdy-dowdy; it is widely employed among girls to criticise each other's heights, as heights is considered as a mark of beauty in Jordanian society.

(7). F1: <sup>c</sup>ala ʔi::sh *shayfih alha, ma hi wl ʔisbi*<sup>c</sup>i.

'Who do think herself is? She is as tall as my finger.'

F2: ʔah wala *ħata ʔisbi*<sup>c</sup>i a wal minha.

'You are right, even my finger is taller than her.'

Obviously, in this example, the measure unit *ʔisbi*<sup>c</sup> (a finger) is metaphorically used to express a sarcasm, and a criticism of a girl's height i.e. she is very short.

A finger may also be used to refer to the person's health case, especially when s/he is sick or becomes skinny. For instance, someone may say to a friend "*sayir wijhak <sup>c</sup>ard ʔisba <sup>c</sup>i:n*" (Lit. Your face is two fingers breadth), it means that your face is very skinny, as an indication that you are sick or look so exhausted.

**B. Fitir (small span)** (is the distance between the index finger and the thumb. It is about 15 cm. depending on the individual's hand size). **Fitir** is employed in JSA to refer to short lengths and heights. It is mainly used with cloths, water and lands.

(8). gi <sup>c</sup>it igma:sh u:lha fitir.

'A piece of cloth, its length is small span.'

*Fitir* donates a very short length or height in this example. It is noted that Jordanian speakers tend to use specific measure terms to refer to lengths and heights.

### **C. Shibir (Large span)**

*Shibir* is another measure term utilized to refer to heights and lengths; it is larger than *fitir*. It is a traditional unit of distance equal to 9 inches (approximately 22.9 centimetres) or 1/4 yard. This distance represents the span of a man's hand with fingers stretched out as far as possible<sup>(6)</sup>. *Shibir* is used to be a popular measure term especially for lands (areas), and clothes in JSA. Sometimes, it is used for sarcasm when referring to someone who is short. Moreover, it is used with liquid items, especially water, as there is a popular proverb in JSA says, *bighrag ib shibir may* (He sinks in a large span of water). It is a sarcastic expression refers to those who are unable to manage things; and they commit many mistakes when they are asking to do things i.e. those who are unreliable. In addition, it collocates with land, like *shibir ʔard* (a span of land).

(9). ana mustaḥi:l afarri ib shibir min ʔardi.

'For me, it is impossible to waste a span of my land.'

**D. Idhra:<sup>c</sup>** (Arm's-length) is an old measure term in JSA. The length of a human arm is standardized as a unit of distance equals to about 70 centimetres or 28 inches<sup>(7)</sup>. It was used for lands, but nowadays, especially tailors in Jordan employ it with cloths, albeit some of them are using the meter as a measurement when tailoring cloths, but it is still in use.

(10). ʔinta biḥa:jit ʔrba<sup>c</sup> ʔadhru<sup>c</sup> igma:sh misha:n tfaṣi:l thu:b.

'You need four arms of cloth to make a address for you.'

**E. Gadam (foot)** is another measure term, which was used as a measurement for land, but meter is employed instead nowadays. A foot is a unit of length equals to 12 inches, taken from the average length of the human foot. One foot equals to 0.3048 meters. Nowadays, it is used to refer to the heights and the capacity of refrigerators

- (11). ʔishtari:t thala:ji 16 gadam.  
'I bought a 16 feet refrigerator.'

**F. Fahjih (sit or stand with the legs spread wide)** is also used for the length of land; it is only used by ordinary people. Officially, the Department of Survey and Lands in Jordan use metre as a measure term for lengths and areas. Moreover, it is used in casual conversations to refer to the distance between places. Again, its use here is also sarcastic as **fahji** may refer to the distance of three kilometres or more; no one can expect the distance of *fahji*.

- (12). A: gadi:sh ba<sup>c</sup>i:dih ilmasafih min hu:n?  
'How far is the distance from here?'  
B: ya zalamih kulha fahjih.  
'Oh, man! It is a fahjih( not far away).'

In this example, *fahji* is used as a mitigation to indicate the shortness of the distance. However, the distance can be longer than expected, the speaker B does not want to disappoint the speaker A.

### 5.3. Measure terms for unspecified distances

Jordanians use social specific measure terms to refer to unspecified distances. These terms are usually employed when the speaker is uncertain about the distance of the place. Besides, they may be used ironically, especially when the place is far away and the speaker wants to relieve the listener in order not to think of the length of the distance. The following expressions are the most popular in JSA.

#### 5.3.1. Magraṭ il<sup>c</sup>aṣa مقرط العصا (Literally, the length of a stick/ pragmatically, not far away)

This measure term is so popular in Jordanian society, especially among the elderly people. It refers to unspecified distance, particularly when the distance is somehow long, and the speaker does not want to tell the listener about the exact distance in order not to disturb him/her. Surprisingly, no one can foretell how long that distance.

- (13). M1: Ya:zalami wi:n rayiḥi:n ? shakloh ilmaka:n ba<sup>c</sup>i:d.  
'Oh, man! Where are we going? It seems that the place is so far from here'.  
M2 : La ya:zalami, magra il<sup>c</sup>aṣa.  
'No, man! It is not far away from here'.

### 5.3.2. Farkit ka<sup>°</sup>aib فركة كعب (Lit.: turning a heel/ (Prag. a short distance)

This term is also popular in JSA, as it refers to a short distance. *Fahjih* can be used interchangeably with this term. It is normally employed to encourage the other party to go for a walk rather than riding a car.

(14). M1: Khali:na inru:h bisayarah.

'Let us go by a car.'

M2: la yazalmih ma hi *Farkit ka<sup>°</sup>aib*

'No, man! It is not far away.'

Jordanians may measure the distance of a place by how much time does it take to reach to the destination, especially when the speaker is not quite sure about the exact distance from one place to another, or to denote the shortness of that place. A person may say, *bi ?imkanak timshi:ha aw bissya:ra kulha btukhidh minnak khamis dag:ayig* (You can walk or drive for five minutes from here to reach your destination).

## 6. Conclusions

Based on the data analysed above, the employment of body organs as measure terms to refer to heights, lengths and weights is socially and culturally inherited and transmitted from one generation to another in JSA, that is, the usage of these terms is pertained to the Jordanian society. Jordanians tend to use body organs, like fingers, arms, feet and legs, as measure terms for heights and weights (liquid or solid amounts). Jordanians have special terms for particular amounts used for cooking measurements, weights and heights, and they employ them distinctly. This leads us to the assumption that there is a strong and mutual relation between language and the society in which it is employed. To illustrate, language can only be understood within its social context, and the shared knowledge between the interlocutors. Further studies are recommended, especially in translation field to investigate the translatability of these terms into English or other languages.

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### Endnotes

1. Cited in Wardhaugh, Ronald (1986). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
2. *kamshi* becomes *kamshit* in compound
3. See How Many? A Dictionary of Units of Measurement. Available at <http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/dictF.html>
4. See How Many? A Dictionary of Units of Measurement. Available at <http://www.unc.edu/~rowlett/units/dictF.html>
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