

Structural and social variable use of the negators *laʔ*, *laa*, and *wa-laa* in Syrian Arabic

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Abstract

This study investigates the variable structural and social distribution of the negators *laʔ*, *laa*, and *walaa* in Syrian Arabic (SA), answering the following research questions:

1. What are the functions and/or structural contexts that trigger the use of the investigated negators?
2. How frequent each negator with each one of these functions and/or contexts?
3. Is there correlation between each negator and certain functions and/or structural contexts?
4. Are there differences between children and adults in their implementation of these functions and/or structural contexts regarding each negator?
5. Are there sex and/or age differences in the use of these negators?

The study analyzes 1972 tokens gleaned from the naturally occurring speech of 50 children and 22 adults with equal gender distribution in each generation and equal numbers of children and males and females in each of four age groups 6-8, 9-11, 12-14, and 15-18. The three negators are treated separately due to differences in functions and/or contexts and lack of inter-dependency. Negators are coded according to their function and/or contexts for each speaker. Statistical analyses are performed to determine the effects of sex and age and any correlations between frequency of negators and functions and/or contexts.

laʔ and *laa* share seven functions: answering yes/no/tag questions, negating propositions, contrastive negation, agreement, emphatic negation, repair, and interjection. However, absolute prohibition is performed only with *laʔ*. *laa* can express prohibition; negate verbs, nouns, PPs, adverbs, demonstratives, adjectives, pseudo-verbs; form the (impersonal) negative copula *laanaa* and *laaʕee* (usually formed with *maa*); and in classical expressions. *walaa*, known as negative coordinator, can function as a stand-alone negator, performing prohibition, negating nouns, verbs, PPs, pseudo-verbs, passive participles, demonstratives, adjectives, pronouns, quantifiers, active participles, and forming (impersonal) negative copulas. *laʔ* negates most frequently propositions and yes/no/tag questions. It occurs as *laaʔ* almost categorically among children and as *laʔ* almost categorically among adults. *laa* performs most frequently prohibition, followed by negating yes/no/tag questions and propositions. *walaa* negates most frequently nouns, verbs, and PPs.

Age emerged as statistically significant among children regarding *laaʔ*; use decreases as age decreases. Gender emerged as statistically significant among adults; men use less *laʔ* than women. In the combined data, age and gender merged as statistically significant; males use less *laʔ* than females, and children use more than adults. Age emerged as statistically significant regarding *laa* and *walaa*; children use less *laa* and *walaa* than adults.

These findings partially reflect the complexity and great variability of the negative system in SA both linguistically and socially. They show that certain functions/contexts favor certain negators more frequently than other functions/contexts. The differences in functions/contexts provide evidence that *laa* and *laʔ* are different negators in SA, whereas both would be considered *laa* in Modern Standard Arabic. *walaa* can function as a separate negator, not only as negative coordinator. The findings also show generational differences regarding *laʔ*, *laa* and *walaa* and gender difference regarding *laʔ*. Although this study does not deal with phonological variation, a shift towards the use of the elongated *laaʔ* among children is observed.