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Article

The First-Person Singular Object/Possessive Pronominal Suffix in Ḥuwēṭāt Arabic in Tabuk: Variation between [-i] and [-iːh]

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Abstract: This study investigates sociolinguistic variation in the first-person singular object/possessive pronominal suffix in the Ḥuwēṭāt dialect spoken in Tabuk Province, northwestern of Saudi Arabia. The variable has two attested realisations: the traditional local form [-iːh] and the innovative supra-local form [-i]. The study examines the extent to which linguistic factors, including phonological context and gemination, and social factors, particularly age and gender, condition the use of the traditional variant. Data were collected through sociolinguistic interviews with 37 members of the Ḥuwēṭāt tribe and comprised 331 tokens. The data were coded and analysed using Rbrul. The results show that the traditional [-iːh] variant occurs slightly more frequently than the innovative [-i], accounting for 52.9% and 47.1% of the tokens, respectively. Gender and gemination emerged as statistically significant predictors of the traditional variant. Geminated contexts favour [-iːh] (58%, factor weight = 0.559), while non-geminated contexts disfavor it (50%, factor weight = 0.441). Male speakers also favour [-iːh] (60%, factor weight = 0.573), whereas female speakers show a lower rate of the traditional variant (48%, factor weight = 0.427). Cross-tabulation further reveals a gendered age pattern: younger females favour the innovative form, whereas younger males retain the traditional form at a relatively high rate. These findings suggest that the variable is sociolinguistically conditioned and that the traditional suffix retains considerable vitality in the Ḥuwēṭāt community. Although the age pattern may be compatible with ongoing change, the cross-sectional nature of the data calls for caution in interpreting the results as evidence of change in progress.
Keywords: Ḥuwēṭāt, suffix, linguistic factors, social factors, variation, Tabuk.

1. Introduction

Previous studies have documented the use of the first-person possessive/object suffix in several Saudi Arabian dialects. However, little attention has been paid to this feature in the Ḥuwēṭāt dialect of Tabuk. In particular, the variation between the traditional form [-iːh] and the innovative supra-local form [-i] has not, to the best of the author's knowledge, been systematically investigated in this dialect. The present study documents variation between an innovative supra-local variant [-i] and a traditional local variant [-iːh] and investigates whether this variation is conditioned by phonological and social factors.

Research Questions:

Specifically, the study addresses the following questions:

(1) What is the distribution of the two variants in the *Huwēṭāt* dialect?

(2) Which phonological factors condition the choice between [-i] and [-iːh]?

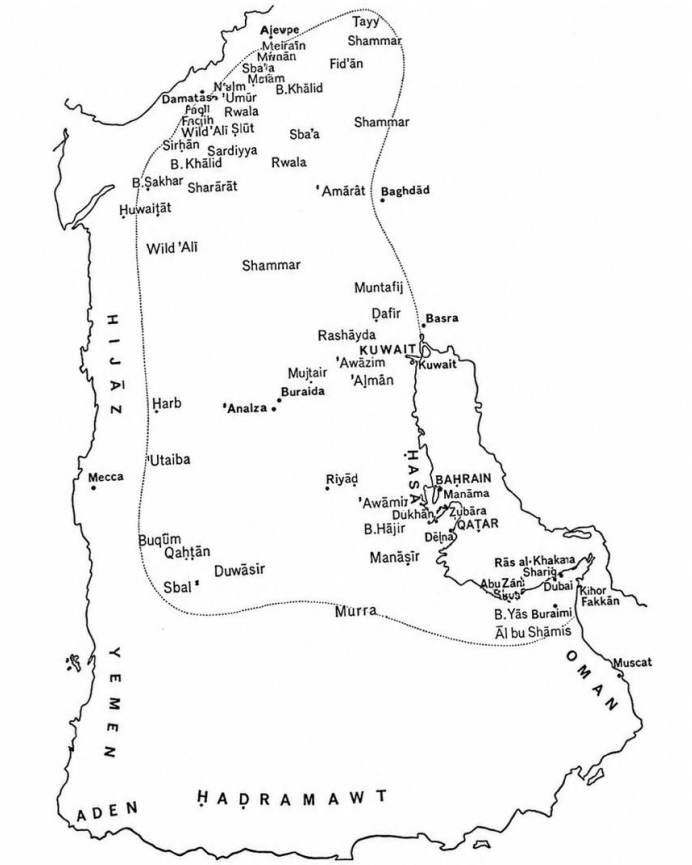
(3) To what extent do social factors, such as age and gender, influence variant selection?

2. Literature Review

As it was stated earlier, despite the presence of a considerable body of descriptive and sociolinguistic research on the dialects of Saudi Arabia, there remains a relative dearth of descriptive and linguistic literature on the dialects of the northern tribes of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This is particularly the case in Tabuk Province, where a variety of tribal and non-tribal dialects are spoken. In recent years, several studies have investigated the dialects of different tribes in Saudi Arabia. For example, Alghamdi (2014, 2021) examined linguistic features of the Ghamdi tribe in Mecca, whose ancestral homeland is Al-Baha in southern Saudi Arabia. Al-Balawi (2015) investigated the dialect of the Bili tribe in Tabuk Province, while Hussain (2017) included aspects of the dialect of the Ḥ*arb* tribe in his research. Alaodini (2019a, 2019b) investigated the dialect of the Dosari tribe in Dammam, Al-Rohili (2019) examined the dialect of the Ḥ*arb* tribe residing in Medina, and Altalhi (2024) investigated the dialect of the Huthail tribe in Alshafa Village in Taif, west of Saudi Arabia. To the best of my knowledge, however, no previous study has specifically investigated the dialect of the Ḥuwēṭāt tribe in Tabuk Province. Although Aldarsoni (2015), in an encyclopedia of Saudi Arabian dialects, provides descriptions of several Saudi dialects and mentions some linguistic features of the Ḥuwēṭāt dialect, no study to date has focused specifically on its linguistic structure or patterns of variation and change.

The major tribes in Tabuk Province include Bani *ʿAṭiyya* and Ḥuwēṭāt, alongside other tribes such as Bili, Juhaina, *ʿAniza*, and *ʾal-Masāʿīd* (Al-Jaser, 1981; Al-Tayyib, 2000). Despite the linguistic diversity of the region, the dialect of the Ḥuwēṭāt tribe remains relatively underdocumented.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the first-person singular object/possessive pronominal suffix -i:(h) in the dialect of the Ḥuwēṭāt tribe in Tabuk Province, northern Saudi Arabia. The dialect of the Ḥuwēṭāt tribe is classified as a Bedouin dialect. According to Johnstone's (1967, p. 1) classification, the Ḥuwēṭāt dialect belongs to the North Arabian dialect group (see Map 1 below).



Map 1: Dialect map of Northern Arabia (Johnstone, 1967-3).

In this dialect there are two articulatory variants for the 1st object/possessive pronominal suffix: the innovative supra-local [-i] and the traditional [-iːh]. The form [-i] is treated here as innovative or supra-local variant, because it corresponds to the widely distributed form found in many contemporary Saudi and other Arabic varieties, whereas [-iːh] represents the locally associated *Ḥuwēṭi* form reported in previous descriptions. Supra-local forms are defined as "the process by which, as a result of mobility and dialect contact, linguistic variants with a wider socio-spatial currency become more widely adopted at the expense of more locally specific forms" (Britain, 2010, p. 194). In KSA, supra-local forms are often influenced by the dialects of Riyadh, the capital, or Hijazi region.

Utilising Rbrul software for a comprehensive quantitative analysis, the investigation explores the symbiotic relationship between linguistic variables—specifically, preceding and following phonetic conditions and social factors, including age and gender. The data were analysed within the variationist sociolinguistic framework, which draws on the pioneering work of Labov (e.g., 1966). This approach is based on the premise that linguistic variation and change are not random or "free," as was previously assumed. Rather, variation is systematic and patterned, and it is shaped and constrained by both linguistic and social factors. The variation between the innovative [-i] and the traditional [-iːh] variants in *Ḥuwēṭāt* can be viewed within the broader sociolinguistic perspective proposed by Al-Wer et al. (2022), who emphasize that linguistic change is shaped by the interaction of linguistic and social constraints. Accordingly, the distribution of the two variants in the present data is examined in relation to both linguistic factors and social variables such as age and gender.

To obtain empirical data, in-depth sociolinguistic interviews were conducted with a carefully selected cohort of 37 speakers from the *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe that residing in Tabuk Province. The dialect of *Ḥuwēṭāt* was rarely studied in the literature of Arabic dialects, therefore this article focuses on a distinguished feature in their dialect and tries to fill the gap on introducing a new variable in the literature in *Ḥuwēṭāt* dialect spoken in Tabuk area. Tabuk is the capital of Tabuk region located in the northwest of KSA, and it is very close to the Jordanian border. It is 146,072 km2. Tabuk province consists of six governorates: Umluj, Al-Wajh, Duba, Tayma, Haql, and *Al-Badʿ*. In term of history, it is known as the 'Land of Midian' (See Burton, 1878), The province is crossed by the *Ḥijaz* Railway, which was constructed during the Ottoman period under Sultan Abdul Hamid II. It is the gateways for pilgrims (*Ḥajj*), a store for the railway and a quarantine center (Carruthers, 1935). Historically, the region has also been inhabited by members of the *Ḥuwēṭāt* and *Bani ʿAṭiyya* tribe (Burton, 1878). Tabuk is considered the base of the northern region, and surrounding it are some of the most important archaeological remains found in the Arabian Peninsula. To its south are *Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ*, *Wādī al-Qurā*, and *ʾal-Ḥijr*, which are among the lands of *Thamūd*. To the east of Tabuk lies the city of Taymāʾ, along with archaeological remains dating back many centuries and extending deep into history. To the west are cities containing the tombs of the people of Prophet Shuʿayb, as well as many other archaeological sites. Tabuk is also considered fertile agricultural land, suitable for cultivation, with abundant water that enables many farmers and gardeners to grow crops (Al-Harfi,1989).

According to Al-Jaser (1981: 71) the lands of *Ḥuwēṭāt* stretches from the north of Umluj in the north of Hijaz on the Red Sea and Sinai, and from Tayma in the South to the north in Karak in Jordan (See Map 2 below). The origin of this tribe according to Burton (1878) goes back to *ʾalʾašrāf*. Burton characterised the *Ḥuwēṭāt* as one of the major Bedouin tribes of northwestern Arabia, with settlements extending along the "coast of Midian". He described their presence across a broad area stretching from the Gulf of Aqaba into northwestern Arabia and highlighted their nomadic way of life, genealogical traditions, and occupations as camel breeders and guides.

Map 2: A map shows Tabuk area with cities and counties around as: Umluj, Taima, Al-Wajh, Duba.
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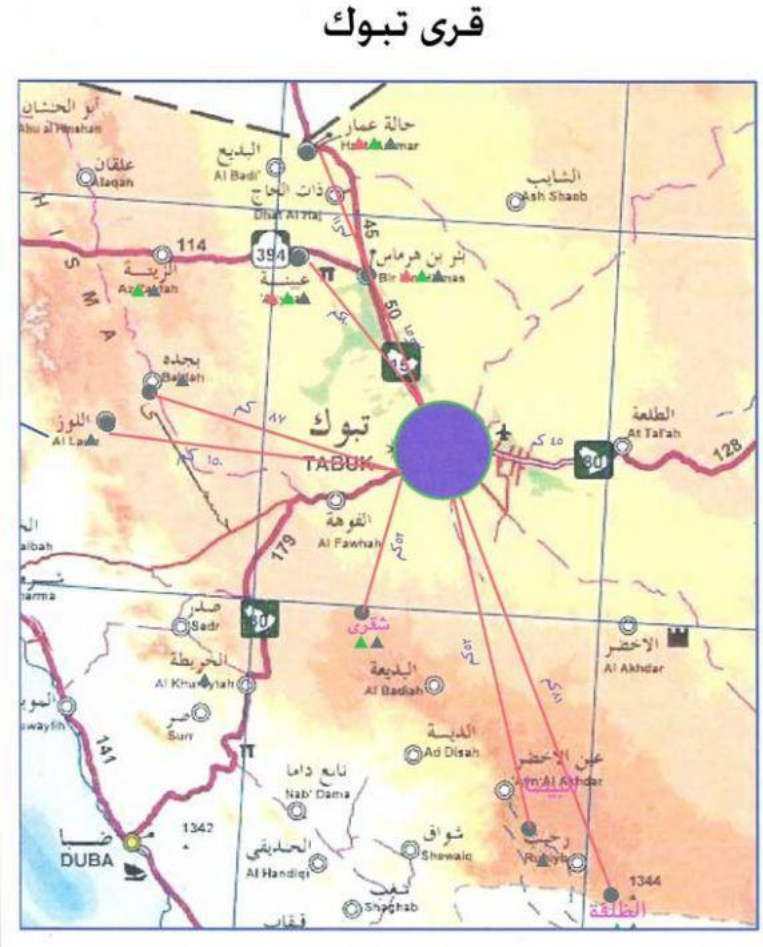
The *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe comprises several branches, including *dgīgi*, *ṭgēgi,ʿbēwāni*, *bsēsi*, *ʿAmēri*, *ilmašhūri*, *Ġannāmi,* and *Ilmūsi*. Participants representing these branches were included in the present sample. Although branch affiliation was not included as a factor in the statistical model, differences between branches were reported informally by some participants and may warrant investigation in future research. Whether the suffix functions as a distinctive *Ḥuwēṭi* feature, rather than as a broader feature shared with neighbouring tribes (especially with *Bani ʿAṭiyya*), requires comparative investigation.

As mentioned earlier, far too little attention was paid to the dialect of *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe in general (as long as they are presence in Egypt, Jordan and KSA) and the *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe that reside in KSA in specific. The *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe extends widely among Jordan, the north of Saudi Arabia and Sinai in Egypt. Palva (2004) described the dialects of *Ḥuwēṭāt* in al-Gafr in Jordan and De Jong (2011) described the dialect of Sinai and one of the dialects he described there was the dialect of *Ḥuwēṭāt*. The sample of the current research was collected from Tabuk Province, including different villages there. The villages are *ʾAddīsah*, *ʃwa:g* , *il'amūd*, and *ʃayab* (See Map 3 below). According to some members from the current sample, that the dialect of *Ḥuwēṭāt* that reside east of Duba (e.g. *ʾAddīsah* and *ʃwa:g*) differs from the ones that reside in the villages and counties in the north of Duba (e.g. Haql). This information needs to be investigated in the future and to study each division separately.



Map 3: A map shows the villages around Tabuk. https://www.almrsal.com/post/774235.

3. SG object/possessive pronominal suffix -i:(h)

This study investigates the realisation of the first-person singular object/possessive pronominal suffix in the traditional Ḥuwēṭi dialect spoken in northwestern Saudi Arabia. In the contemporary dialect, this variable has two variants: the innovative supra-local variant [-i] and the traditional variant [-i:h]. The study focuses on a linguistic variable that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has not previously been documented in the Ḥuwēṭi dialect or other dialects in the Arab world.

The independent personal pronouns attested in the Ḥuwēṭāt dialect are presented in Table 1 below.

	3rd	2nd	1st
SGM	hu:	*ʔint/ ʔinta*	*ʔana*
SGF	*hi:*	*ʔinti:*	*ʔana*
DU	*hum*	*ʔintu:*	*ʔiħna*
PLM	*hum*	*ʔintu:*	*ʔiħna*
PLF	*hum*	*ʔintu:*	*ʔiħna*

Table 1: The independent personal pronouns in Ḥuwēṭāt dialect.

The primary focus of this study is the first-person singular possessive/object pronominal suffix in the Ḥuwēṭi dialect spoken in northwestern of KSA. For contextual purposes, the possessive/object and indirect-object pronominal suffixes attested in the dialect are presented in the table below.

Um 'mother'	3rd	2nd	1st
SGM	*-ah*	*-ak*	*-i/ -i:h*
SGF	*-ha*	*-ik/ -ki*	*-i/ -i:h*
DU	*-hum*	*-kum*	*-na*
PLM	*-hum*	*-kum*	*-na*
PLF	*-hum*	*-kum*	*-na*

Table 2: The possessive/ object suffix in Ḥwēṭāt dialect.

Unlike the independent personal pronouns, the possessive/object pronominal suffixes do not exhibit gender differentiation in the first-, second-, or third-person plural forms. Similarly, the suffixes do not distinguish between dual and plural forms. The first-person singular possessive/object suffix also shows no gender-based distinction.

De Jong (2011: 239) described the possessive pronoun for the *Ḥuwēṭāt* in Sinai to have:

(C)C-ī, v:-y (poss.) -ni: (object)

There was no mention for the traditional variant 1st object/possessive pronominal suffix -i:(h) in De Jong account. It might be because and according to my observation that not all the branches of *Ḥuwēṭāt* has this linguistic feature.

The different forms of this suffix in Arabic and Arabic dialects

The first-person singular object/possessive pronominal suffix has a long historical and linguistic presence in Arabic. A related form can be traced to the Qur'anic tradition in the form of hāʾ al-sakt (هاء السكت), an additional hāʾ occurring at the end of certain words. This word-final /h/, which is an extra *hāʾ*, is traditionally associated with pausing and is used in specific phonological contexts, particularly to facilitate pronunciation and maintain the realisation of a final vowel (Moqbel, 2024).

Traditionally described as a phonological element used in particular contexts to facilitate pronunciation and preserve the final vowel. Seven Qur'anic forms are commonly cited in this connection:

لَمْ يَتَسَنَّه [lam jatasannah], "does not change / deteriorate"

فَاقْتَدِهْ [faqtadih], "so follow it"

كِتَابِيَهْ[kita:bijah], "my book"

حِسَابِيَهْ [ħisa:bijah], "my account"

مَالِيَهْ [ma:lijah], "my wealth"

سُلْطَانِيَهْ[sultˁa:nijah], "my authority / my power"

and مَاهِيَهْ [ma:hijah], "what is it?"

In the latter examples, the final *-h* is traditionally interpreted as hāʾ al-sakt, rather than as an ordinary possessive or object pronoun. This historical form is particularly relevant to the study of pronominal suffixes in Arabic dialects, where forms such as [kita:bijah] 'my book' and [hjah] 'her' illustrate the use of a consonantal element associated with pronominal marking. The comparison suggests that the occurrence of /h/ in pronominal forms has both historical and dialectal dimensions, although the Qur'anic hāʾ al-sakt should not be equated directly with the modern dialectal

possessive pronominal suffix. Examining these forms diachronically can therefore provide useful insight into the development, grammaticalisation, and phonological variation of pronominal suffixes in Arabic.

Sībawayhi distinguishes the hāʾ that functions as a marker of pronominal reference from the hāʾ associated with pausal pronunciation (Alwaqf الوقف). In his Kitāb, he explicitly describes the former hāʾ as ʿalāmat al-iḍmār 'the hāʾ that is the marker of the pronoun', while his discussion of pausal phenomena provides an early grammatical account of the phonological function of final hāʾ (Sībawayhi, 1999, IV, 159–160, 189–198). This distinction is particularly relevant to forms such as Qur'anic kitābiyah 'my book', in which the final -h is traditionally analysed as hāʾ al-sakt, rather than as the possessive pronominal suffix itself. He added that *hāʔu-s-sakt* occurs in different positions, as in gimminations, at the end of words ended with /j/ or /w/, after plural /n/ نون الجمع, etc.

The final /h/ in the traditional *Ḥuwēṭi* suffix invites comparison with the Arabic grammatical tradition concerning *hāʾ al-sakt*, a word-final /h/ associated with pausal contexts. However, the synchronic dialectal suffix [-iːh] should not be assumed to be historically identical to *hāʾ al-sakt*. The comparison is nevertheless relevant because it demonstrates the long-standing presence of word-final /h/ in Arabic forms associated with first-person marking and pausal pronunciation.

4. SG object/possessive pronominal suffix in Arabic and Saudi dialects

Al-Balushi (2016, p. 100) examined linguistic variation between Bedouin and *Ḥadar* communities in Suwaiq, Oman. Among the linguistic features investigated was the first-person singular possessive pronoun. The study found that *Ḥadar* speakers used /-i/, whereas Bedouin speakers used /-iyəh/. Al-Balushi related the latter form to the phenomenon traditionally described as hāʾ al-sakt in Qur'anic recitation, as illustrated by forms such as kitāb-iyah 'my book' and ḥisāb-iyah 'my account'.

More broadly, the realisation of the first-person singular object and possessive suffix varies across Arabic dialects. In many Gulf dialects, the suffix is realised as /-iː/, although different forms are reported in Oman and in the traditional dialect of Al-Ahsa. For example, the traditional Al-Ahsa form has been described as [-jah], while /-iː/ is also reported in dialects such as Egyptian, Jordanian, Syrian, and Iraqi Arabic. These patterns indicate considerable dialectal variation in the realiation of the first-person singular suffix across Arabic-speaking communities.

Holes (2016) reported a further variant in the Baḥarna dialect of Manama, Bahrain, where [-je] occurs as a possessive suffix. Examples include [ʕabuːje] ~ [ʕabuːj] 'my father' and [ʕaxuːje] 'my brother'. Similarly, Al Sheyadi (2022, p. 53), in her description of the Suwaiq dialect of Oman, identified variation among [-je], [ji], and [-ja] as realisations of the first-person singular object and possessive suffix. Her examples include [ʕumur-ja] 'my age', [uxuːt-jih] 'my sister', and [abuː-je] 'my father'. She further reported variation toward [-iː] among younger speakers, suggesting an ongoing change in the realisation of this suffix.

Variation has also been reported in the dialect of Al-Ahsa. Al-Bohnayyah (2011–2019, p. 53) described unconditioned variation between [-iː] and [-je], as illustrated by [głum-iː] ~ [gałam-je] 'my pen'. The study further noted that this feature had traditionally been associated with the Al-Ahsa dialect irrespective of the speaker's sectarian affiliation (p. 39).

More recently, Altalhi (2024, p. 2) investigated the first-person singular possessive and object suffix in the Huthail dialect spoken in Alshafa village, Taif, in western Saudi Arabia. The study examined variation in relation to age, gender, and education. Two traditional forms were identified, [-jah] and [-njah], as illustrated by [ketab-i] ~ [ketab-jah] 'my book' and [waʕd-ni] ~ [waʕd-njah] 'he promised me'. The findings showed that younger speakers were shifting away from the traditional [-jah] form toward [-iː], which the study characterises as a standard or urban dialect norm. Older and less-educated women showed higher use of [-jah], whereas more highly educated speakers showed lower use of the traditional form. Altalhi interpreted this pattern as evidence of dialect leveling, whereby a locally distinctive first-person singular suffix is increasingly competing with more widely used forms.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate substantial variation in the realisation of the first-person singular object and possessive suffix across Arabic dialects. They also suggest that the distribution of these forms may be associated with both local dialect identity and broader processes of dialect contact and leveling**.** The variation reported in Oman, Bahrain, Al-Ahsa, and Huthail provides a useful comparative background for examining the [-i] ~ [-iːh] alternation in the *Ḥuwēṭāt* dialect investigated in the present study.

Altalhi (2024, p. 2) investigated the first-person singular possessive and object pronominal suffix in the Huthail dialect spoken in Alshafa village, Taif, in western Saudi Arabia. The Huthail variety is classified as a Bedouin Hijazi dialect. The study examined variation in the suffix-form corresponding to 'my' and 'me' in relation to three social factors: age, gender, and education. Two traditional variants were identified, [-jah] and [-njah]. The findings showed that younger speakers increasingly favored the [-iː] form over the traditional [-jah], which Altalhi characterises as a standard or urban dialect norm. The study provides examples such as [ketab-i] ~ [ketab-jah] 'my book' and [waʕd-ni] ~ [waʕd-njah] 'he promised me'.

The social analysis further indicated that older and less-educated women were more likely to retain the traditional [-jah] form, whereas more highly educated speakers showed lower rates of its use. Altalhi therefore interprets the pattern as evidence of ongoing dialect leveling, whereby a locally distinctive first-person singular suffix is increasingly competing with more widely used or prestigious forms. This finding is particularly relevant to the present study because it demonstrates that variation in the first-person singular object/possessive suffix can reflect broader processes of dialect contact and supra-localisation in Saudi Arabic.

The relevance of this line of research extends to the relatively underdescribed dialects of northwestern Saudi Arabia. The present study specifically investigates variation in the first-person singular object/possessive pronominal suffix in *Ḥuwēṭāt* Arabic spoken in Tabuk Province. The suffix examined here differs in its phonological realisation from several forms reported in previous descriptions of Arabic dialects. In particular, the traditional *Ḥuwēṭāt* form consists of a long high vowel followed by word-final /h/, represented in the present study as [-iːh]. Comparable variation involving the presence of a final h has been reported in Omani Arabic. Al-Balushi (2016) found that the first-person singular possessive suffix was realised as /-i/ in the Ḥadar variety of Suwaiq, whereas the Bedouin variety exhibited /-iyah/. Al Sheyadi (2022) likewise reported several realisations of the suffix in Suwaiq, including [-je], [ji], and [-ja], alongside variation toward [-iː] among younger speakers.

Of particular relevance to the present study, Aldarsoni (2015, pp. 410–411) explicitly reports the addition of /h/ following the first-person singular possessive suffix in the dialects of the *Ḥuwēṭāt* and Banu ʿ*Aṭiyyah* tribes in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Examples include [waladiː] ~ [waladiːh] 'my son' and [madrastiː] ~ [madrastiːh] 'my school'. Aldarsoni also notes the occurrence of related forms in Eastern Saudi dialects, including those of Saihat and Al-Ahsa. However, the phonological realisation of the suffix differs between the northwestern and Eastern varieties.

In the *Ḥuwēṭāt* and Banu ʿAṭiyyah varieties, the suffix is described as a long high vowel followed by word-final /h/. Aldarsoni provides forms such as xālt-iːh 'my aunt', ʿammt-iːh 'my aunt', ǧaddit-iːh 'my grandmother', and ḥayāt-iːh 'my life'. By contrast, the Eastern Saudi varieties described by Aldarsoni display a different realisation, involving a change in the vowel and the realisation of the first-person marker, as in xālat-yah 'my aunt', ʿammit-yah 'my aunt', and ǧaddit-yah 'my grandmother' (Aldarsoni, 2015, pp. 410–411).

Although Aldarsoni's description establishes the presence of the [-iːh] form in *Ḥuwēṭāt*, the form has not, to the best of the present study's knowledge, been subjected to a systematic sociolinguistic analysis in this variety. The present study therefore builds on these descriptive observations by examining the variation between the traditional local [-iːh] and the innovative [-i] forms and by investigating the linguistic and social factors associated with their distribution among *Ḥuwēṭāt* speakers in Tabuk Province.

The 1st object/possessive pronominal suffix -i:(h) in the present research

This study addresses a gap in the existing literature by investigating the sociolinguistic variation of the traditional pronominal suffix *-iːh* and the innovative form *-i* in the dialect of the *Ḥuwēṭāt*, *i.e. malaff-iːh ~ malaff-i* 'my file'. The variants of the 1st object/possessive pronominal suffixes are:

[-i] (the innovative supra-local) and [-iːh] (the traditional).

In the traditional *Ḥuwēṭi* dialect the suffix is *-iːh*, and according to the participants, the traditional [-iːh] form is perceived as a distinctive feature of *Ḥuwēṭi* speech.. Below are some examples for the 1st object/possessive pronominal suffix from the data:

ʔummiːh ~ ʔummi 'my mother'

ʤadditiːh ~ ʤadditi 'my grandmother'

ʤaddiːh ~ ʤaddi 'my grandfather'

ʔuxtiːh ~ ʔuxti 'my sister'

xawaːliːh ~ xawaːlli 'my uncles'

gałbiːh ~ gałbi 'my heart'

sijjartiːh ~ sijjarti 'my car'

Participants and Data Collection

Sampling

The present study investigates the dialect spoken by members of the *Ḥwēṭāt* tribe residing in Tabuk region, with particular attention to the influence of social factors, specifically age and gender, on dialectal variation. The linguistic factors examined in the analysis include the phonological characteristics of preceding sounds (coronal and dorsal), following sounds (coronal and dorsal), and gemination. The study sample comprises 37 participants between the ages of 20 and 90. The participants were selected with the aim of establishing three distinct age groups, allowing age and gender to be examined as independent variables. The criteria used to determine the sample size and its stratification are outlined in the following section.

An important consideration in sociolinguistic research is the selection of participants who adequately represent the wider speech community under investigation. Accordingly, participants were recruited from different villages and counties across Tabuk Province to ensure representation of diverse sections of the *Ḥwēṭāt* tribe, as outlined in the preceding section. This approach was intended to capture the range of linguistic practices within the community and to enhance the representativeness of the sample. As Milroy and Gordon (2003: 24) note, participant selection is a fundamental methodological consideration in sociolinguistic research. Particular attention was paid to eliciting relatively spontaneous speech during the interviews. This is challenging because of the well-known "observer's paradox," whereby the presence of the researcher may influence the way participants speak, making it difficult to observe their speech in its most natural form (Milroy & Gordon, 2003: 49). The observer's paradox broadly refers to the possibility that observation or measurement may affect the behaviour being studied (Dale & Vinson, 2013: 305). To minimise this effect, interviews were conducted in a friendly and informal atmosphere, and participants were encouraged to express their views freely and discuss topics of personal interest. In addition, a range of topics was prepared to encourage extended and relatively casual conversation.

The collection of data from male participants presented particular practical challenges given the conservative social context in which the research was conducted. To address these challenges, a number of interviews with male participants were conducted by telephone. The remaining interviews were conducted by a male research assistant. All participants were informed of the objectives and nature of the study prior to the interviews.

The data, collected through sociolinguistics interviews from February 2022 to 2024. Data were collected from 37 speakers from the *Ḥuwēṭi* tribe (15 men and 22 women). Data were collected through sociolinguistic interviews

and analysed using Rbrul software version 4.3.1 for 331 tokens that were spread in Excel spread sheet in order to prepare the tokens for analysis (Johnson 2009). The researchers coded for both linguistic and social factors. The linguistic factors were the preceding and following sounds. Regarding the social factors, I coded for gender (men and women) and age (old, middle-age- young).

Gender	Age group
Men	
Old (60 and above)	6
Middle-aged (40-59)	4
Young (20-39)	5
Women	
Old (60 and above)	7
Middle-aged (40-59)	5
Young (20-39)	10
Total	37

Table 3: The distribution of the sample of speakers.

Age

Age is a vital variable in sociolinguistics because it traces chronological language shifts. While growing older is a universal human experience, its actual implications depend on cultural contexts (Eckert, 1997). Moreover, studying age-related linguistic variations provides researchers with a deeper temporal perspective on language development, or provide 'depth in time' (Al-Wer, 2006).

As human aging and go through life stages, modifications in their sociolinguistic competence and constant\relevant change according to these stages are likely to occur. The social factors in sociolinguistic studies play an important role in the mechanism that language change relies on. One of these factors is age in which the pattern of variation is a reflex of language change.

As Milroy and Gordon pointed out:

“Age by itself has no explanatory value; it is only when examined in the context of its social significance as something reflecting differences in life experiences that it becomes a useful analytical construct.”

(Milroy and Gordon 2003:39)

Dividing age in sociolinguistic studies has no fixed rules, which means that based on the researcher’s knowledge, background and history on the community age then can be divided. In this study, age is divided into three groups: young (20-39), middle-age (40-59) and old (over 60 years old). This division of age is systematic and based on the knowledge that researchers gathered about the community. Concerning old speakers, starting from the age of 60 is because this group grew up in the time where they tried the nomad time in which constant move is a style of life. Some of the participants in this age group did not go to school nor higher education. Whereas some of them, often visit their family, friends and acquaintances cross the water in Sinai. On the other hand, middle-age and young groups are more settled and gathering in districts inside Tabuk or their villages, and they went to normal schools and most of them went to the university in Tabuk.

Gender

Gender was scrutinised as a social variable in this study, aligning with Cheshire's assertion (2002) that it plays a pivotal role in linguistic variation and change. For example, Trudgill (1974) noted that women often lean towards prestigious or standard linguistic forms more than men. Many sociolinguistic studies have pointed out the importance of gender in a variety of ways. Speakers' gender is very important to set as a social factor in sociolinguistics (Milroy & Milroy, 1997). One of the differences between gender that we have to determine is what Trudgil (1974:180) explains that women to use standard and prestigious features more often than men. young women were found to use the innovative supra-local variant as in the studies of Alqahtani (2015) in Asir for the use of the definite article. While other studies show that women retained traditional features as the study of Al Sheyadi (2022) in Oman found that men and women behave differently in the use of the traditional [gj], women were retaining the use of [gj] in comparison to the innovative [ʤ]. Alaodini (2019b) for the use of retroflex [ɖ], was more in the speech of older women. In another recent study in Duba, in Tabuk, women were conservative in retaining the traditional linguistic variants the stops sound for the interdentals /θ/ and /ð/ (Alaodini, 2026). Alghamdi (2014, 2021) investigated the speech patterns of the Ghamdi tribe in Mecca, whose ancestral homeland is Al-Baha in southern Saudi Arabia. Although members of the Ghamdi community continue to retain the interdental fricatives [θ] and [ð] in their traditional dialect, these variants have largely receded in the Meccan context, where they have been replaced by the corresponding stop variants [t] and [d] or the sibilants [s] and [z]. The findings indicate that younger women exhibit a modest tendency toward the stop variants, while traditional heritage forms remain in use. This pattern suggests that the community is undergoing gradual sociolinguistic change, shaped in part by migration, urbanisation, and sustained contact with the wider Meccan speech community. More broadly, the interaction between age and gender emerges as a significant factor in patterns of dialect variation and change, as demonstrated across studies of sociolinguistic variation.

Data and analysis

The variable (-i) in the current study has two variants; the [-i], which is the dominant and widely used variant in KSA, and the [-j:h], which is the traditional form for the *Ḥuwēṭi* dialect. The main body of the data derives from sociolinguistic interviews with 15 male and 22 female members of the *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe in Tabuk Province. Since the possessive suffix under investigation was not elicited from all participants, the analysis was limited to the 37 speakers who produced the variable. Speakers who did not use the feature were therefore excluded from the relevant analysis. The distribution of the variant also appears to be conditioned by speakers' affiliation with different sections of the *Ḥuwēṭāt* tribe. Its use is particularly prominent among older speakers of both genders. Interestingly, however, the variant also occurs in the speech of younger male speakers. This pattern may reflect the use of the traditional form as a marker of *Ḥuwēṭi* identity, whereby younger men may employ the variant to index or reinforce their affiliation with the tribe.

The variable (-i:) has two variants: the innovative [-i:] and the local variant [-i:h] (the application value). Files were coded in Excel sheet that was converted to a comma separated value file (.csv), in order to be used in Rbrul (version 4.3.1 (2023-06-16) "Beagle Scouts") (Johnson, 2009). The total number of tokens is 331. The tokens of this variable were coded for four factor groups: linguistic variables (preceding and following sounds and gemination), age old (aged 60 and above), middle-aged (40-59) and young (20-39), and gender (Male and female). Files were coded in Excel sheet that was converted to a comma separated value file (.csv), in order to be used in Rbrul. Data were analysed using Rbrul software.

This section presents the quantitative analysis of the data. A factor weight above 0.5 indicates that a variant is favoured, whereas a factor weight below 0.5 indicates that it is disfavoured. As shown in Table 4, gender is the most significant factor group ($p = 0.0109$), followed by gemination ($p = 0.0464$). The model has an R^2 of 0.033, indicating that the factor groups included in the analysis account for approximately 3.3% of the variation in the dependent variable.

Factor	Level	Tokens	[i:h] %	Factor Weight

Gemination	Yes	118	58 %	0.559
	No	213	50 %	0.441
Gender	Male	131	60 %	0.573
	Female	200	48 %	0.427

Table 4: Rbrul results of the correlation of the use of [-i:h].

The statistical analysis yielded several key findings. Rbrul returned only gemination and gender as significant factors. The usage of the innovative feature [-i] is (156 tokens) in comparison with the use of the traditional feature [-i:h] (175 tokens). Rbrul results show that gender and gemination favor the use of [iːh] to different degrees**.** With respect to gemination, the results indicate that tokens occurring in geminated contexts show a higher rate of [iːh] (58%, FW = 0.559) than non-geminated contexts (50%, FW = 0.441). Geminated tokens slightly favor the use of [iːh], whereas non-geminated tokens disfavor it.

With respect to gender, male speakers show a higher rate of [iːh] (60%, FW = 0.573) than female speakers (48%, FW = 0.427). The factor weights indicate that male speakers favor the use of [iːh], while female speakers somehow disfavor it. Overall, the results suggest that [iːh] is more strongly associated with male speakers and geminated contexts**.**

To see the distribution of the variable among age and gender, cross-tab was done, the table below shows the Distribution of [-i] and [-i:h] by age and gender.

Age Group	Gender	[-i] (%)	[-i:h] (%)
Middle-aged	Female	65 %	35 %
	Male	40 %	60 %
	Total	**49 %**	**50 %**
Older	Female	41 %	59 %
	Male	50 %	50 %
	Total	**44 %**	**56 %**
Younger	Female	57 %	42%
	Male	32 %	67%
	Total	**48 %**	**51%**
Overall	Female	52 %	48 %
	Male	42%	58%
	Total	**47 %**	**52 %**

Table 5: Distribution of [-i] and [-i:h] by Age and Gender.

The table shows age pattern and the behaviour of both females and males, rather than only looking at the overall age effect. Middle-aged males favor [-i:h] (60%), whereas females favor [-i] (65%). Older females slightly favor [-i:h] (59%), while males show an even distribution (50% each). Younger males strongly favor [-i:h] (67.2%), whereas females favor [-i] (57.8%). Overall, the results show the increase use in [-i:h] among younger speakers is much stronger among males than females. Generally, the use of the innovative variant [-i] by the young speakers in this study could be due to many reasons: Firstly, might be because they were speaking to outsiders (the researcher), so they might be hiding the traditional form [-i:h].

Secondly, it might be because they mix with other dialects. Overall, the traditional variable still widely in use as the results reveal, and that due this variant distinguishes *Ḥwēṭāt* dialect and some participants associated the traditional variant with local *Ḥuwēṭi* identity. On the contrary, the use of authentic tribal dialects by influencers, which reflects the linguistic and social particularities of local communities, in Tabuk, supports positive consumer buying behavior and long-term brand loyalty. The use of the authentic dialect presents tribal depth and rich cultural heritage (Al-Rohili & Alaodini, 2026).

Several factors may account for the relatively greater use of the innovative supra-local [-i] variant among younger speakers. One possible explanation is style-shifting or audience design: younger participants may have accommodated their speech toward the researchers, particularly if they perceived the researchers as outsiders, resulting in reduced use of the locally traditional [-iːh] variant. Another possible explanation is dialect contact. Younger speakers may have greater exposure to speakers of other Saudi and supra-local varieties through mobility, education, employment, media, and social networks. Such contact may facilitate the diffusion of the innovative [-i] variant into the local speech community. Further research involving a larger sample and speakers from different social networks would help determine whether the pattern represents a sustained change in progress or reflects age- and context-specific variation.

5. Conclusion

The present study was designed to investigate the 1st object/possessive pronominal suffix [-iːh] and [-i] in *Ḥuwēṭāt* dialect in Tabuk Province. The present study is a sociolinguistic investigation, and Rbrul was used to analyse the data that were obtained through informal audio-recorded sociolinguistic interviews with 37 participants from the *Ḥwēṭāt* in Tabuk.

The statistical analysis reveals that gemination and gender were returned as significant factors. Overall, the innovative variant [-i] occurred in 156 tokens (47.1%), compared with 175 tokens (52.9%) for the traditional [-iːh] variant. Rbrul results indicate that geminated contexts slightly favor the traditional [-iːh] variant (58%, FW = 0.559), whereas non-geminated contexts disfavor it (50%, FW = 0.441). Gender also emerged as a conditioning factor, with male speakers favoring [-iːh] (60%, FW = 0.573), while female speakers showed a lower rate of this variant (48%, FW = 0.427).

The cross-tabulation of age and gender reveals a gendered distribution of the two variants. Middle-aged females favor the innovative [-i] (65%), whereas middle-aged males favor [-iːh] (60%). Among older speakers, females slightly favor [-iːh] (59%), while males show an equal distribution. Among younger speakers, males favor [-iːh] (67.2%), whereas females favor [-i] (57.8%). Thus, the apparent increase in [-i] among younger speakers is primarily driven by females, suggesting that the variation is conditioned by the interaction of age and gender rather than age alone.

Several factors may account for the greater use of the innovative [-i] variant among younger speakers. One possible explanation is style-shifting, whereby younger participants may have accommodated to the researchers, particularly if they perceived them as outsiders to the local speech community. Such accommodation could have reduced their use of the locally associated traditional [-iːh] variant. However, this explanation remains tentative, as the data do not provide direct evidence of audience-related style-shifting. Another possible factor is dialect contact. Younger speakers may have greater exposure to other Saudi and supra-local varieties through mobility, education, employment, mass media, and social networks. Such increased contact may facilitate the diffusion of [-i] and contribute to the gradual reduction of locally distinctive features in *Ḥuwēṭāt* Arabic.

Overall, the findings indicate that the variation between [-i] and [-iːh] in *Ḥuwēṭāt* Arabic is sociolinguistically conditioned, with gender and phonological context emerging as significant factors in the multivariate analysis. Although the descriptive patterns show a relatively greater use of the innovative [-i] variant among younger speakers, this pattern should not be interpreted as straightforward evidence of an ongoing change in the community. In particular, the relatively high use of the traditional [-iːh] variant among younger male speakers suggests that the form may continue to carry positive local and tribal meanings and may be maintained as an expression of local identity and

affiliation. Conversely, the greater use of [-i] among younger female speakers may partly reflect style-shifting or accommodation to the interview context, particularly if the traditional [-iːh] variant is more strongly associated with informal speech within the home and local community. Thus, the apparent age-related pattern may reflect differences in the social meaning and contextual use of the two variants rather than a simple generational shift from [-iːh] to [-i]. Further research based on more varied speech contexts, including informal interactions and home-based data, would be necessary to determine whether the innovative [-i] variant is genuinely advancing or whether the observed pattern primarily reflects contextual and gender-related differences in variant use.

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