# The evolution of sectarian linguistic stratification:
# Jordan as a case study

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A number of cases of linguistic differentiation in Arabic-speaking communities along the lines of religious affiliation have been documented. The classic examples include communities in the Arab East as well as the Maghreb[1]. In all of these cases, the differences between the dialects spoken by the various religious groups are so large that they are considered separate dialects and are labelled according to the groups that use them. Thus we find references to 'Christian/Muslim/Jewish/Sunni/Shi'i dialects'. The emergence of separate sectarian dialects is generally attributed to a combination of two historical factors: different origins of the dialects in question, and a prolonged period of social segregation and/or social tension.

The Levant, a region of considerable diversity and a long history of political instability, would be a candidate for linguistic differentiation along religious lines, yet, until recently, findings from dialectological and sociolinguistic studies have shown no effect of religion. Insofar as Jordan is concerned, I have previously argued that the tribal structure of the Jordanian society, in which religious affiliation plays no role in group identity formation, has discouraged linguistic segregation along religious lines. However, subsequent research (conducted by E. Al-Wer and B. Herin), which involved analyses of multiple grammatical features of some central Jordanian dialects, uncovered patterns which indicate that 'religion' may indeed be emerging as a sociolinguistic factor.

This presentation focuses on the interpretation of this development. In particular, we argue that the increased social salience of religious affiliation has transformed religion from a community signifier into a sociolinguistic variable; and due to recent socio-political developments in the region, religion has modified the effect of language on social stratification (Al-Wer et al. 2015).

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[1] Baghdad, Blanc (1964); Abu-Haidar (1991); Palva (2009). Bahrain (Holes 1987). Egypt (Woidich 1996). Morocco (Heath 2002).

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