

Echoes of Erasure:
‘Modern Judeo-Arabic’ and Communal Belonging
among Arabs of ’48 in Tel Aviv-Jaffa

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Abstract

This paper explores linguistic practices among Arabs of ’48 (Palestinian citizens of Israel) in Tel Aviv-Jaffa, focusing on their impact on identity, inclusion, and intra-communal fragmentation. It sheds light on estrangement from and erasure of the Arabic language and culture in the unique field of Tel Aviv-Jaffa. It introduces a so-called ‘Modern Judeo-Arabic’ – Arabic written in Hebrew script for digital communication – a common practice among Arabs of ’48 from the Jaffa area. Unlike historically documented Judeo-Arabic, this form of Arabic has evolved independently and serves as a powerful marker of linguistic adaptation in response to cultural-linguistic erasure, particularly for younger generations attending Jewish schools and pressured to adapt in Jewish-majority spaces.

Examining both the structural features and social context of this practice reveals the continuing erasure of Palestinian presence in Israel and a broader narrative of cultural estrangement and racial passing. It highlights how Arabs of ’48 respond to racism in Tel Aviv-Jaffa and its underlying conditions of colonial erasure and cultural hegemony. This adaptation, however, also reinforces fragmentation within the Palestinian community – between Arabs of ’48 and Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories, and even among Arabs of ’48 themselves, depending on place of socialization and linguistic education. The study shows how language can become a boundary marker, deepening feelings of alienation and mistrust across different segments of the Palestinian community, while offering a lens on language as a tool for inclusion, survival, belonging, and resistance in contested spaces.

This paper contributes a novel perspective to scholarship on Arabs of ’48, underscoring the need for further study of region-specific linguistic shifts within broader socio-political contexts. Through a blend of ethnographic observation and linguistic analysis, based on qualitative interviews conducted in colloquial Arabic, this research adds a precise turn to the discussion of intersectional discrimination and isolation faced by Jaffa’s Arabs of ’48.