



Sociolinguistic anatomy of mobility: Evidence from Qatar



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ABSTRACT

This is a sociocultural linguistic study on the ways whereby mobility is reflected upon in life narratives. An ethnographically informed sociolinguistic scale analysis shows that when residents **narrate** their life experience before and after they come to work in Qatar, they construct their sense of mobility as a system with two axes on which people locate themselves: one horizontal, with a spatiotemporal focus, and one vertical with a social stratification focus. The spatiotemporal dimension is constructed through stancetaking, while the social stratification dimension through upper- and lower-level scales. Epistemologically speaking, this study contributes towards the modeling of mobility as a constructed experience in an under researched absolute monarchy-led, financially booming, rapidly expanding and globalized context, such as Qatar.

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of a continuous flow of diverse people from countries with usually weaker economies to ones with usually stronger economies, resulting from fundamental changes in the spatial and temporal contours of social existence and leading to easy and cheap communication between people, who may be remotely located from each other, sociolinguists have recently started to investigate traditional phenomena of sociolinguistic interest, such as ideologies (e.g. [Atkinson and Moriarty, 2012](#)), language variation and change (e.g. [Britain, 2013](#)), and not least social identity construction (e.g. [Theodoropoulou, 2014](#)) in the framework of globalized and globalizing circumstances (e.g. chapters in [Collins et al., 2009](#); [Stroud and Mpendukana, 2009](#); [Blommaert, 2010](#); chapters in [Coupland, 2010](#)). Language and semiosis in general are seen as key factors in the realization of the aforementioned phenomena in everyday life of individuals and societies.

The State of Qatar ([Map 1](#)), a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), can be seen as a good example of a country going through excessive industrialization and being treated as an example of a globalized country.

The reason for its extensive industrialization is its vast amount of natural gas. The country relies primarily on long-term natural gas contracts that provide stability in the sense that they are not subject to the same short-term price fluctuations as crude oil, which is expected to run out around 2020 ([Fromherz, 2012](#): 3).

Qatar is one of the most economically successful countries in the world. It is a rentier state (cf. [Beblawi, 1990](#); [Gray, 2011](#)), namely a state that lavishly distributes oil and natural gas revenues among the local populations mainly in the form of free or heavily subsidized housing, health care, education, and cradle-to-grave welfare projects rather than say opting to extract revenues from domestic sources (as is the case in most non-rentier economies). In 2011, Qataris were the world's richest people in GDP per capita terms.¹ The country's economy produced \$98,900 (£61,600) per person, more than twice as much as

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¹ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21029018> (22/6/2014).



Map 1. State of Qatar.

the US (\$48,300) and over ten times the level seen in China (\$8400). According to the same BBC article, for Qatari citizens, GDP per citizen is in fact closer to \$690,000. The \$98,900 is an average for the total population including many migrant workers and Qatar's wealth is heavily concentrated among Qatari citizens. Qatar's economy continues to expand rapidly having the fastest growing economy on earth with 19% growth.

Despite the country's economic growth, wealth has not been able to transform the basic social structures of the nationals of Qatar, which remain traditional and remarkably resilient. Qatar is based on long-established lineage loyalties (Anderson, 1974; Gellner, 1990; Fromherz, 2012). Individual Qataris are still grouped according to lineage, or consanguinity (Fromherz, 2012: 6). More specifically, one's qabila, namely one's extended tribe or family, remains the fundamental determinant of an individual Qatari's social position and future prospects. The most powerful tribe² within Qatar is the Al-Thani one, who have appropriated the title of 'Emir' exclusively for themselves (Montigny-Kosłowska, 1982). A similar pattern of tribal groups being incorporated into the state while also losing some of their formal power, if not the memory of that power, prevailed for other Qatari tribes and lineage groups as well. Notable examples of such groups are Al-Sudan and Al-Ainain, who were in Qatar long before Al-Thani (O'Sullivan, 2008: 211–213).

On the other hand, this resilience of social structures is far from being the case when it comes to expats,³ the other group of residents of Qatar, who form the vast majority of the country's population. Recent sociodemographic changes in the State of Qatar (see Fig. 1), and in particular the influx of big numbers of white-collar and professional expats and immigrant workers, which keep rising, have led to more speculation about the ways the contemporary Qatari society is stratified as well as people's perceptions and reflections on these.

² It is noteworthy that the term tribe is a highly problematic one not least due to its association with categorizing, orientaling tendencies in Western scholarship (cf. Ferdinand and Nicolaisen, 1993). Any effort to define the term is beyond the scope of this paper.

³ Non-Qataris and expatriates (or expats, which is the abbreviated version of the word used extensively in Qatar) will be used interchangeably throughout the paper.

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