

***The /r/ Phoneme in Mosuli Arabic:  
A Phono-Pragmatic Study***

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The [r] sound is very elusive in nature. Its production is usually affected by the neighbouring sounds. This is perhaps the reason that provoked phoneticians and phonologists to pay considerable attention to the different variants of this sound.

The most common variant of this sound in English is the alveolar tap (Gimson, 1970: 208). But the way this sound is pronounced in Arabic is rather different. Although there are some examples of a one-tap trill in Arabic (as in the word [barīd]-mail), this sound is normally pronounced as a trill (as in the words [ħurriyya] -freedom. [rabbī] -my lord, and [ʔarrazzāq] - the Provider.

This sound has assumed different variants in Arabic to the extent that some Arab scholars have called it “the confusing sound” (Salih, 1972: 64). It can sometimes be assimilated, altered, or even deleted. This paper is an attempt to arrive at some explanation of how this sound is used in one dialect of Arabic, viz. Mosuli Arabic (MA).

Generally speaking, Mosulis tend to pronounce /r/ as [ʁ]. But we should not hold this as a rule. If we consider the words

1. [rabbī] my lord
2. [ṣābir] patient
3. [raḥmān] merciful,

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we will find that the normal pronunciation of the sound has been retained. This means that not every /r/ in Mosuli is realized as [ʁ], for in the above words it is realized as [r]. The paper will try then to discover the different variants of the /r/ phoneme in MA.

The [ʁ] realization of the /r/ phoneme is not unique to MA only. The same phenomenon can be found in the Tikriti variety of Iraqi Arabic, but with slight differences. It seems that both varieties have descended from one unknown proto-variety that most of its rules have been lost. We should not also forget that the same thing is found in some European languages. The Parisians, for example, have their own French variety in which the /r/ is realized as [ʁ]. Some languages do not even have a /r/ phoneme in their linguistic system, like Japanese, causing its users some problems in learning other languages.

### ***A Phono-pragmatic Study***

The term “pragmatics”<sup>(\*)</sup> in its modern use in linguistics was originated by the philosopher Charles Morris (1938) within a broad theory of semiotics. Morris distinguished between three branches of inquiry: Syntactics, the study of ‘the formal relations of signs to one another’, Semantics, the study of ‘the relations of signs to objects to

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\* The term ‘pragmatics’ should not be confused with ‘pragmatism’, which is a philosophical doctrine found mainly in the British philosophical literature (See Morris, 1938: 43; Lyons, 1977: 119).

which the signs are applicable’, and Pragmatics, the study of ‘the relations of signs to interpreters’ (Morris, 1938: 6). Linguists have ever since fallen into two distinct views: some believe that pragmatics is not more than a linguistic level that completes the other levels, hence this view gains its name as the ‘complementarist (or Anglo-American) view’ adopted by such scholars as Leech (1983) and Levinson (1983); while some others believe that pragmatics is an umbrella under which all the linguistic levels are assimilated, this view is called the continental (or European) view and it can be detected in Verschueren (1987, 1997) and issues of the Journal of Pragmatics.

We believe that a compromise between the two views is possible. Thus, pragmatics is not adopted in this paper as a superordinate term under which all the other linguistic levels are subordinated (the continental view), nor is it adopted as being complementary to the level of semantics (The Anglo-American view). Rather we believe that pragmatics can complement each linguistic level in the investigation of a certain linguistic problem pertaining to that level. In other words, a complementarist view is being adopted in this paper, not in the sense that it complements the level of semantics, as suggested by Leech (Leech, 1983: 5-6), but rather in the sense that a syntactic problem can be better investigated if it is pragmatically handled. Consequently, we believe that the problem being investigated in this paper is not a phonological problem in its entirety, since it sometimes varies from one Mosuli speaker to another. Thus, it can be better handled by investigating it both phonologically and pragmatically.

## *Informants and Strategy*

Fifty informants have carefully been selected from five age-groups as follows:

1. Ten informants at the age of 15-20 years.
2. Ten informants at the age of 21-30 years.
3. Ten informants at the age of 35-45 years.
4. Ten informants at the age of 50-60 years.
5. Ten informants at the age of 61-70 years.

The researcher gave each of the informants a passage written in Standard Arabic, and asked them to read it in MA. In a later stage, spontaneous conversations were arranged with the informants in which the researcher pushed his informants to the areas that he expected to be full of words containing the target sound.

## *Discussion*

/r/ as [ʁ]

There is some assumption among Iraqis that Mosulis tend to replace every [r] by [ʁ]. The following arguments are put forward to argue against this general tendency.

1. Mosulis tend to pronounce /r/ as [r] when the [ʁ] pronunciation changes the meaning of the word. Some telling examples are:
  4. [yisbər] to be patient
  5. [rasūl] a messenger
  6. [rāya] a flag

In these examples, the /r/ is realized as [r] in order to avoid confusing it with other words in case it is realized as [ʁ]. This can be affirmed by the fact that MA does contain a /ʁ/ phoneme which has nothing to do with the [ʁ] allophone of the /r/ phoneme. The following examples contain the /ʁ/ phoneme and form minimal pairs with the preceding set of examples:

7. [yisbəʁ]            to paint
8. [ʁasūl]            washed clothes
9. [ʁāya]            and end

The only exception to this is the word [ʃāʁə] in which the [ʁ] can either be a distinct phoneme to mean ‘(he) practised the art of goldsmithing’, or a /r/ which is realized as [ʁ] to mean ‘became’. The conjugation of the verb , however, will be different depending on the meaning. Thus, the verb [yaʃūʁu] will be used with the former meaning, while [ʔiʃīʁ] with the latter,

2. Remarkably, the Mosulis do not use the [ʁ] allophone of /r/ when dealing with religious names, especially the ‘Husna names of Allah’:

10. [rabb]            Lord
11. [rahmān]        The Merciful
12. [rahīm]        The Compassionate
13. [sattār]        The Veiler
14. [raʔūf]        The Gracious
15. [ʁaffār]        The Much-Forgiving
16. [razzāq]        The Provider

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The only exception to this point is the lunar month [ɣamaɖān] in which the [ɣ] allophone is used though the [r] is used in other lunar months like [muħarram] and [rəʃab]. The same word, however, is pronounced with the [r] allophone when it is meant to be a person's name (See the following point).

3. All the proper nouns (whether names of persons or things) are pronounced with the [r] allophone. The following examples are the ones given to the informants:

- |               |                               |
|---------------|-------------------------------|
| 17. [furāt]   | Euphrates (the river)         |
| 18. [ʔarbīl]  | A city in North Iraq          |
| 19. [barāzīl] | Brazil                        |
| 20. [rāmī]    | person's name                 |
| 21. [marwān]  | person's name                 |
| 22. [rustum]  | person's name                 |
| 23. [rāʔid]   | person's name (military rank) |

4. When the [r] and [ɣ] co-occur in a single word within one or more syllable boundaries, the realization of /r/ as [ɣ] is frowned upon.

This prohibition may index the fact that Mosulis' rhythmical patterns are not organized around the principle of having two occurrences of [ɣ] in one word. This organizational principle may roughly explicate the interplay between /r/ and /ɣ/. Let us consider the following examples:

- |               |            |
|---------------|------------|
| 24. [ɣarīb]   | a stranger |
| 25. [ɣarɣara] | gargle     |

26. [ʕarīm] an opponent  
 27. [ʕarām] love  
 28. [ʕurāb] a crow  
 29. [raʕba] a desire  
 30. [ʕarīza] instinct  
 31. [ʕurūr] sobbery  
 32. [ʕarāð] stuffs  
 33. [ʕarb] west  
 34. [barʕūθ] a flea  
 35. [maʕāra] a cave  
 36. [ʔistaʕraba] to be surprise  
 37. [ʕāra] a raid  
 38. [ʕīra] jealousy  
 39. [ʕarasa] (he) planted

5. The /r/ is realized as [r] in the following words:

40. [riyāl] riyal  
 41. [riyāða] sport  
 42. [rayy] watering  
 43. [riyāʔ] hypocrisy

But it is realized as [ʕ] in the following words:

44. [rīʕ] → [ʕīʕ] plumage  
 45. [kbīr] → [kbīʕ] big

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46. [kθīr] → [kθīʁ] much (many)  
47. [ħmār] → [ħmāʁ] a donkey  
48. [zanbūr] → [zanbōʁ] a hornet  
49. [tannūr] → [tannōʁ] a baking oven

Careful examination of the above words leads to the assumption that the /r/ which is followed by a glide – as in 40-43 – is realized as [r]. But the one which is followed or preceded by a long vowel is realized as [ʁ], as in 44-49 (Salih, 1972: 69). This is very important because it implies that long vowels increase the probability of having the [ʁ] allophone. If, however, the /r/ is to be realized as [ʁ] when adjacent to a glide, then this glide should change first to a long centralized vowel (Loc.cit). The following examples explicate this, though this cannot be applicable to 40-43 above:

50. [ʔayr] → [ʔēʁ] a bird  
51. [xayr] → [xēʁ] the good  
52. [θawr] → [θōʁ] a bull  
53. [dayr] → [dēʁ] a monastery

## 6. The Glottal Stop:

6.1: The glottal stop which precedes or follows the /r/ normally changes into an appropriate long vowel, and consequently the following or preceding /r/ takes its [ʁ] allophonic copy:



54. [raʔs] → [rās] → [ʔās] a head  
 55. [ruʔūs] → [rūs] → [ʔūs] heads  
 56. [biʔr] → [bīr] → [bīʔ] a well  
 57. [faʔr] → [fār] → [fāʔ] a mouse

6-2: Sometimes, Mosulis delete the glottal stop and pronounce the /r/ as [r]:

58. [qaraʔa] → [qara] (he) read  
 59. [tabarraʔa] → [itbarra] to be discharged

Other Variants of /r/:

The [ʔ] is not the only variant of /r/ in MA. Other allophones can also be found.

1. Sometimes the /r/ is completely deleted, taking a zero variant [Ø], with or without a resultant change in the vowel. For example, the numbers from eleven to twenty are pronounced with the /r/ being realized as [Ø] (Salih, 1972: 65):

60. [ʔidaʕi] eleven  
 61. [θnaʕi] twelve  
 62. [θalattaʕi] thirteen  
 63. [xamiṣtaʕi] fifteen  
 64. [ʕi]ʔin Twenty

2. when the /r/ is adjacent to velar or pharyngeal sounds, it is realized as a long back rounded vowel to make the pronunciation easier (Ibrahim, 1969: 259):

65. [ʁurbāl] → [ʁübēl] sieve  
66. [ʔarbaʕin] → [ʔōbʕīn] forty  
67. [xurqa] → [xōqa] tatter  
68. [qurṣa] → [qōṣa] a flat loaf of bread  
69. [xurfan] → [xūfēn] sheep

3. The /r/ is often deleted and a preceding /q/ is geminated:

70. [ʔaqrɑʕ] → [ʔaqqɑʕ] baldheaded  
71. [ʕaqraba] → [ʕaqqabi] scorpion

4. Finally, the /r/ may be realized as [d]:

72. [rafas] → [dafas] kicked

### ***Problematic Words:***

The fact that the /r/ phoneme has several different allophones confused the non-native speakers of MA, especially the Turks who ruled Mosul for centuries. When these people were faced with a word containing the /r/ phoneme, and felt hesitated as to whether the right allophone was [ʁ] or something else, they went to a different synonym which does not contain a /r/ (Salih, 1972: 66-67). Since we are passive in receiving language, we believe that these new words replaced the words with the /r/ in the course of time even by the native Mosulis:

	<b>Words containing /r/</b>	<b>Synonyms with no /r/</b>	
72.	[rasaba]	[ṣaqaṭa]	Failed
73.	[risāla]	[maktūb]	A letter
74.	[ramā]	[zatta]	Threw away
75.	[barq]	[lamīʕ]	Lightening
76.	[ḥaraqa]	[ʔaʕala]	Burnt
77.	[maraḍ]	[waʔaʕaʕ]	Illness
78.	[ṭarbū]	[fēs]	Tarboosh
79.	[sarīr]	[taxit]	Bed
80.	[ṭarada]	[saḥata]	Dismissed
81.	[naḍar]	[dahḥaqa]	Looked
8Z	[nahr]	[ʔaṭṭ]	River
83.	[yiqdar]	[ʔiṭīq]	Can
84.	[yadūr]	[yiftil]	To turn around
85.	[ʔurjūha]	[dēdiyyi]	A swing
86.	[ḡurfa]	[ōda]	Room

The list seems to be open-ended. This proves that all this number of synonyms for all these words containing a /r/ cannot be a matter of coincidence.

## *Conclusions*

The /r/ phoneme in MA assumes different variants, five of which are roughly listed below:

1. /r/ → [r]
2. /r/ → [ʁ]
3. /r/ → [∅]
4. /r/ → [q]
5. /r/ → [d]

### **1. /r/ → [r]**

The normal pronunciation of the /r/ is retained when dealing with nouns of religion and proper nouns (see examples 10-23 above). It is also realized as [r] when its change to the [ʁ] allophone affects the meaning of the word because of the confusion that may result from assimilating it with the /ʁ/ phoneme which already exists in MA (see examples 4-9 above). This change of realization to [ʁ] is not also welcome when the two allophones alternate in one single word (see examples 24-39 above). The /r/ is also realized as [r] after glides and does not change to [ʁ] unless the glide disappears (see the following point and examples 40-43 above).

### **2. /r/ → [ʁ]**

The [ʁ] allophone is used when the /r/ phoneme is preceded by a long vowel, a case which is achieved either by

assimilating a preceding glide (see examples 50-53 above) or a following glottal stop (see examples 54-57 above). The [ʁ] is also used when we have a /r/ environment not described in the preceding point or the following ones.

### 3. /r/ → [∅]

The /r/ is completely deleted (or realized as [∅]) leaving some trace behind represented by a change in the accompanying vowel (though this is not always necessary), (see examples 60-64).

### 4. /r/ → [q]

The [q] allophone is used when there is already a /q/ phoneme subsequent to the /r/ (see examples 70-71 above).

### 5. /r/ → [d]

This is a very rare situation and it is represented by only one word in my corpus (see example 72 above).

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## صوت الراء في لهجة الموصل: دراسة صوتية-براغماتيقية

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### المستخلص

هذا البحث هو محاولة لاستكشاف الألفاظ المتعددة لصوت الراء في لهجة الموصل. يحاول الباحث استقراء القواعد التي يتبعها الموصليون في لفظهم لصوت الراء واكتشاف المناسبات التي يغيرون فيها هذا الصوت إلى صوت آخر. كما يحاول الباحث أن يفند الاعتقاد السائد بأن الموصليين يقومون دائماً بقلب الراء إلى غين، ويحاول أن يثبت بأن عملية القلب تتجه إلى أصوات أخرى غير الغين. وتظهر النتائج في نهاية البحث بأن هناك خمسة أصوات بديلة للراء بضمنها اللفظ الطبيعي للصوت.

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