Identity, ideology, and attitude in child and adolescent speech
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Many previous studies focused on identity construction through language use among adult speakers (e.g., Hazen, 2002). Some studies showed active identity construction among adolescents (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1995; Bucholtz, 1999). This study is concerned with how attitudes, identities, social meanings, and societal ideologies are expressed by children and adolescents who use language variably in the village of Oyoun Al-Wadi in Syria. The study shows that those children and adolescents are highly aware of the various social meanings, ideologies, and attitudes in their local community and in other communities. They are capable of mobilizing this knowledge in varying their speech accordingly. Hence, the study indicates that the children’s identity construction and linguistic expression is the product of their comprehension and absorption of the social norms and ideologies that exist in their surrounding environment (cf. Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). The study also shows that children and adolescents use these attitudes, social meanings, and ideologies to construct their own feminine, masculine, local, or supralocal identities.

Ethnographic information collected during the study of the spread of urban features and the variation of five vowel and consonant variables in the speech of 50 rural children and adolescents ages 6-18 years in the village of Oyoun Al-Wadi in Syria is used in this study. Numerous comments were offered by those children and adolescents. These comments are compared to and supported by comments made by about 30 parents and the local community as a whole. The ethnographic information would help in understanding the linguistic shift or maintenance that is occurring in the speech of girls and boys in this village.

The comments gleaned from the recorded informal conversations provide explanation for the different linguistic behavior of boys and girls in the village. Boys have more positive attitudes towards the local forms, the local community, and thus the local identity. Girls have more positive attitudes towards the urban forms. However, girls and other members of the community including out-of-town mothers are accepting of boys’ use of local forms. Boys and other members of the community including older local males do not only accept the girls’ use of urban forms but also encourage girls to use them and to refrain from using the local forms because the urban forms are associated with refinement and gentleness and the rural ones are associated with locality and masculinity.

The numerous comments indicate that children from an early age are aware of the surrounding attitudes and ideologies towards language use in their local community and in other communities as well. The comments they use about certain sounds indicate their sociolinguistic competence growth and their understanding of the importance of certain sounds to constructing a local or a supralocal identity. The study shows that identity is not a fixed entity; it is fluid (Llamas, 2007) and can be constructed and reconstructed throughout the child’s life. This fluidity is due to the more recent demographic shift and the social and cultural changes that are taking place in the village and in other areas in Syria.