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Language Shift in the Gaza Strip and Its Reflection of Cultural Integration

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Abstract: This paper examines the historical and contemporary language shifts in the Gaza Strip as reflections of cultural fusion, identity formation, and political transformation. Through a detailed review of Gaza's linguistic evolution—from ancient multilingual influences, Ottoman and British colonial legacies, to the impacts of displacement, Egyptian administration, and Israeli occupation—this study highlights how language acts as both a tool of domination and a means of resistance. Case studies on intergenerational language transmission, multilingual practices in markets, linguistic landscapes, and youth social media use reveal how Gazans negotiate complex identities through adaptive and hybrid linguistic behaviors. The findings underscore that language change in Gaza is neither linear nor isolated; it captures the tensions between imposed authority and grassroots agency. This research contributes to broader Middle Eastern sociolinguistics and postcolonial studies, suggesting future directions for empirical research and language policy in conflict-affected communities.

Keywords: Gaza Strip; language change; cultural fusion; identity formation; multilingualism; sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

The Gaza Strip is a narrow coastal region situated along the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Despite its small size of approximately 365 square kilometers, it is home to over two million Palestinians, making it one of the most densely populated areas globally. Gaza shares borders with Egypt to the southwest and Israel to the north and east, positioning it at a crucial geopolitical and cultural crossroads between the Arab world and the wider Middle East. This strategic location has rendered Gaza a frequent target for conquest, colonization, and population displacement throughout its long history.

Historically, Gaza has witnessed the influence of numerous civilizations, including the ancient Philistines, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, and various Islamic caliphates. More recently, the Ottoman Empire, British Mandate authorities, Egyptian administration, and Israeli occupation have successively shaped its political structures and cultural landscapes. Consequently, Gaza's linguistic environment is deeply layered, characterized by the coexistence and interaction of Arabic, Turkish, English, Hebrew, and remnants of earlier languages such as Aramaic and Greek. Language evolution in Gaza reflects more than practical communication; it embodies processes of cultural adaptation, resistance, and fusion [1].

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This study focuses on how shifts in language within Gaza parallel broader patterns of cultural blending and historical change. It examines the impacts of colonialism, occupation, exile, and globalization on linguistic practices across generations, highlighting language's role as a marker of identity and a medium of cultural negotiation [2]. While Modern Standard Arabic dominates formal and religious contexts, vernacular Gazan Arabic, alongside Hebrew loanwords, English expressions, and emerging digital slang, coexist within a complex and often contested sociolinguistic space.

The central thesis contends that language changes in Gaza are neither neutral nor isolated phenomena; rather, they act as indicators of cultural integration, assimilation, and contestation. From Ottoman administrative halls to refugee schools and contemporary social media platforms, the languages used in Gaza reveal a mosaic of identities shaped by displacement, occupation, and resilience. Tracing these linguistic developments offers valuable insight into how Gazans articulate memory, resistance, and self-definition amid ongoing social and political transformations [3].

Figure 1 below illustrates the geographic location of the Gaza Strip, highlighting its position at the intersection of key regional borders and its proximity to the Mediterranean coast.

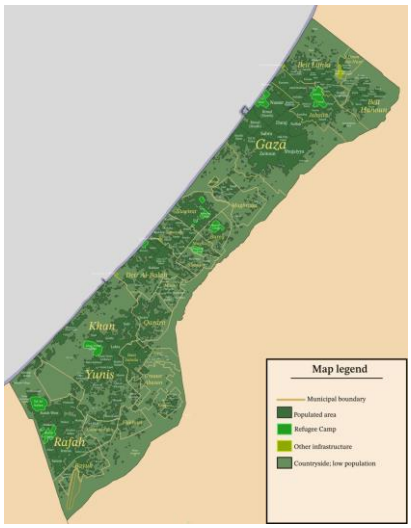

Figure 1. Geographic Location of the Gaza Strip.

2. Historical and Linguistic Background

The Gaza Strip's current linguistic profile is the result of millennia of cultural contact, imperial domination, and population movement. From ancient Canaanite civilizations to modern Israeli occupation, each historical layer has left its imprint on the region's language ecology. This section outlines the major periods of linguistic transformation in Gaza, showing how language reflects broader shifts in cultural identity and political authority [4].

2.1. Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Periods

Before the rise of Islam in the 7th century, Gaza's linguistic landscape was marked by significant diversity. The Canaanites, among the earliest inhabitants of the area, spoke a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew and Phoenician. Over time, Canaanite was gradually replaced by Aramaic, which became the lingua franca of the Levant following the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests [5]. Aramaic remained a dominant spoken and written language in Gaza and its surroundings for several centuries, influencing the vocabulary and structure of the Arabic dialects that would later emerge.

Following Alexander the Great's conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean, Greek gained prominence as a key cultural and administrative language. During the Hellenistic

and Roman eras, Gaza emerged as an important urban center, with Koine Greek serving as the language of trade, governance, and intellectual life. Latin also made its appearance, primarily through Roman imperial administration and the Christian Church [6]. The co-existence of Greek, Latin, and local Semitic languages created a multilingual environment that encouraged both cultural integration and religious diversity.

The arrival of Islam in the 7th century brought a major linguistic transformation. Arabic, as the language of the Qur'an and Islamic governance, quickly spread throughout the region. Initially, Arabic existed alongside Aramaic and Greek, particularly in administrative and religious settings. However, over the following centuries, Arabic became the dominant vernacular language, supported by Islamic institutions, education, and the growth of Arab populations. Importantly, the early Arabic spoken in Gaza incorporated lexical and phonological influences from Aramaic and Greek, resulting in a dialect distinct from those spoken in the Arabian Peninsula. This early Islamic period thus established Arabic as both a religious and cultural foundation, shaping Gaza's enduring linguistic identity.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the map shows the distribution of key languages in the Near East around 2000–1000 BC, highlighting the historical roots of linguistic diversity that influenced Gaza's early language development.

Figure 2. Map of Major Languages in the Near East circa 2000–1000 BC.

2.2. Ottoman Period (1517–1917)

Gaza came under Ottoman rule in 1517, marking the beginning of a four-century period of Turkish administration. Throughout this era, Ottoman Turkish served as the official language of the empire, used extensively in legal proceedings, tax documentation, and formal communications. Although only a small number of Gazans attained fluency in Turkish, the language symbolized imperial authority and played a key role in establishing a sociolinguistic hierarchy where Turkish was associated with governance and power [7].

Meanwhile, Palestinian Arabic remained the primary language of everyday life, religious practices, and oral traditions. The Ottoman administration did not enforce Turkish as the language of mass education or religious teaching, thereby allowing Arabic to maintain its dominant position across most social domains. Nonetheless, the Palestinian Arabic dialect incorporated numerous Turkish loanwords, especially in areas connected to government, law, and material culture—for example, terms like qaimmaqam (district governor) and defter (register). This created a dual linguistic environment: Turkish functioned

as the language of officialdom, while Arabic continued to ground local identity and cultural continuity [8].

Despite Arabic's prevailing presence in daily communication, the Ottoman period introduced bureaucratic multilingualism and established patterns of language contact that would influence Gazan perceptions and responses to later colonial languages, such as English and Hebrew.

As shown in Figure 3, the map illustrates the territorial extent of the Ottoman Empire in 1914, highlighting Gaza's position within the empire's administrative framework during this period.

Figure 3. Ottoman Empire Territory in 1914, Highlighting Gaza's Position Within the Imperial Domain.

2.3. British Mandate Period (1917–1948)

Following World War I, the British occupation of Palestine introduced a new linguistic landscape. Under the British Mandate, officially established in 1922, English became the dominant language of administration, elite education, and international diplomacy. British policies favored English in legal and governmental settings, making proficiency in the language a prerequisite for civil service roles and higher education. This established a new linguistic hierarchy with English at the top, followed by Turkish remnants from the Ottoman era, while colloquial Arabic was largely confined to informal and domestic spheres.

In Gaza, missionary schools, British-run institutions, and elite Arab schools began offering instruction primarily in English, especially in subjects such as science, mathematics, and history. Although Arabic literacy grew, fluency in English emerged as a symbol of social advancement and modernity. Concurrently, Standard Arabic gained institutional support through newspapers and public speeches, serving as a key element of the Arab nationalist movement opposing colonial rule. Gazans thus navigated a complex multilingual environment where language choices reflected both colonial dominance and nationalist identity [9].

The coexistence of English, Arabic (both formal and colloquial), and residual Ottoman Turkish generated linguistic tension and frequent code-switching. This multilingual context also fostered an educated bilingual elite capable of bridging imperial authorities and local communities. Crucially, the British Mandate period laid the groundwork for the enduring cultural influence of English, particularly among Gaza's middle and upper classes.

As depicted in Figure 4, the map illustrates the boundaries of the Mandate for Palestine after the 1921 partition, highlighting Gaza's position within the British-administered territory during this transformative period.

Figure 4. Map of the Mandate for Palestine after the 1921 Partition, Showing Gaza's Location within the British Administrative Territory.

2.4. Post-1948 Displacement and Egyptian Administration

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War resulted in a massive displacement of Palestinians, with hundreds of thousands seeking refuge in the Gaza Strip. As shown in Figure 5, the map illustrates Israeli-controlled areas as of May 14, 1948, prior to the entry of any Arab armies, providing the geographic context for the refugee influx. Families arrived from cities such as Jaffa, Beersheba, and Hebron—areas largely affected by conflict and occupation—bringing with them a diversity of dialects and vocabularies. Over time, these dialects merged with the existing Gazan vernacular, forming a more uniform local Arabic variety shaped by shared trauma and displacement.

Figure 5. Israeli-Controlled Areas in Palestine as of May 14, 1948, Prior to the Entry of Arab Armies.

From 1948 to 1967, the Gaza Strip was administered by Egypt, though it was not formally annexed. Egyptian Arabic influenced local speech through radio, education, and Egyptian officials managing Gaza's institutions. Pan-Arabist ideology, promoted by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, emphasized linguistic unity via Standard Arabic, reinforcing a collective Arab identity beyond national borders.

In refugee camps, language served both preservation and adaptation. Intergenerational transmission reflected nostalgia for lost homelands and the pressures of new communal life. Children grew up speaking a blended Arabic influenced by Egyptian syntax and intonation. Educational institutions stressed Qur'anic Arabic and literary proficiency to promote cohesion amidst political fragmentation.

Although brief, the Egyptian period left a lasting linguistic legacy in Gaza, introducing a Southern Levantine–Egyptian hybrid influence that remains today. It also strengthened the link between language and pan-Arab nationalism, shaping Gazan responses to future occupations and cultural challenges.

2.5. Israeli Occupation and Hebrew Contact

Following the Six-Day War in 1967, Israel occupied the Gaza Strip, initiating a new chapter of linguistic contact and cultural contestation. One of the most striking features of this period has been the introduction of Hebrew into everyday life. For many Gazans, especially laborers who worked in Israel during the 1970s and 1980s, Hebrew became a necessary second language. It was used for communication with employers, navigating bureaucracies, and purchasing goods in Israeli-controlled markets [10].

The Israeli military government introduced Hebrew education in some Gazan schools and detention facilities, often as a means of surveillance and control. Language thus became a tool of occupation, granting those with Hebrew proficiency a modicum of mobility while reinforcing the asymmetries of power. In border zones and mixed commercial areas, code-switching between Arabic and Hebrew was common. Certain Hebrew words related to technology, labor, and security entered Gazan Arabic, particularly among working-class men.

Yet this bilingualism was ambivalent and often contested. As the First Intifada (1987–1993) unfolded, a cultural resistance movement began promoting a return to Arabic purity and national linguistic pride. Hebrew was increasingly viewed as a symbol of oppression, and efforts emerged to remove Hebrew signage and vocabulary from public spaces and youth discourse. Standard Arabic was reasserted in education, religious institutions, and political rhetoric, creating a tension between practical bilingualism and ideological monolingualism.

In recent decades, especially after the 2007 blockade and Hamas's rise to power, contact with Hebrew has declined due to reduced mobility and economic isolation. However, remnants of Hebrew continue to appear in Gazan speech, particularly among older generations and in contexts involving Israeli media or humanitarian coordination. In contrast, English has re-emerged as the preferred foreign language, reflecting shifts in global alignment, aid dependency, and educational policy.

The Israeli occupation period illustrates how language contact can result in both pragmatic adaptation and symbolic resistance. It reveals the complex interplay between coercion, survival, and identity formation under conditions of prolonged conflict (Figure 6).

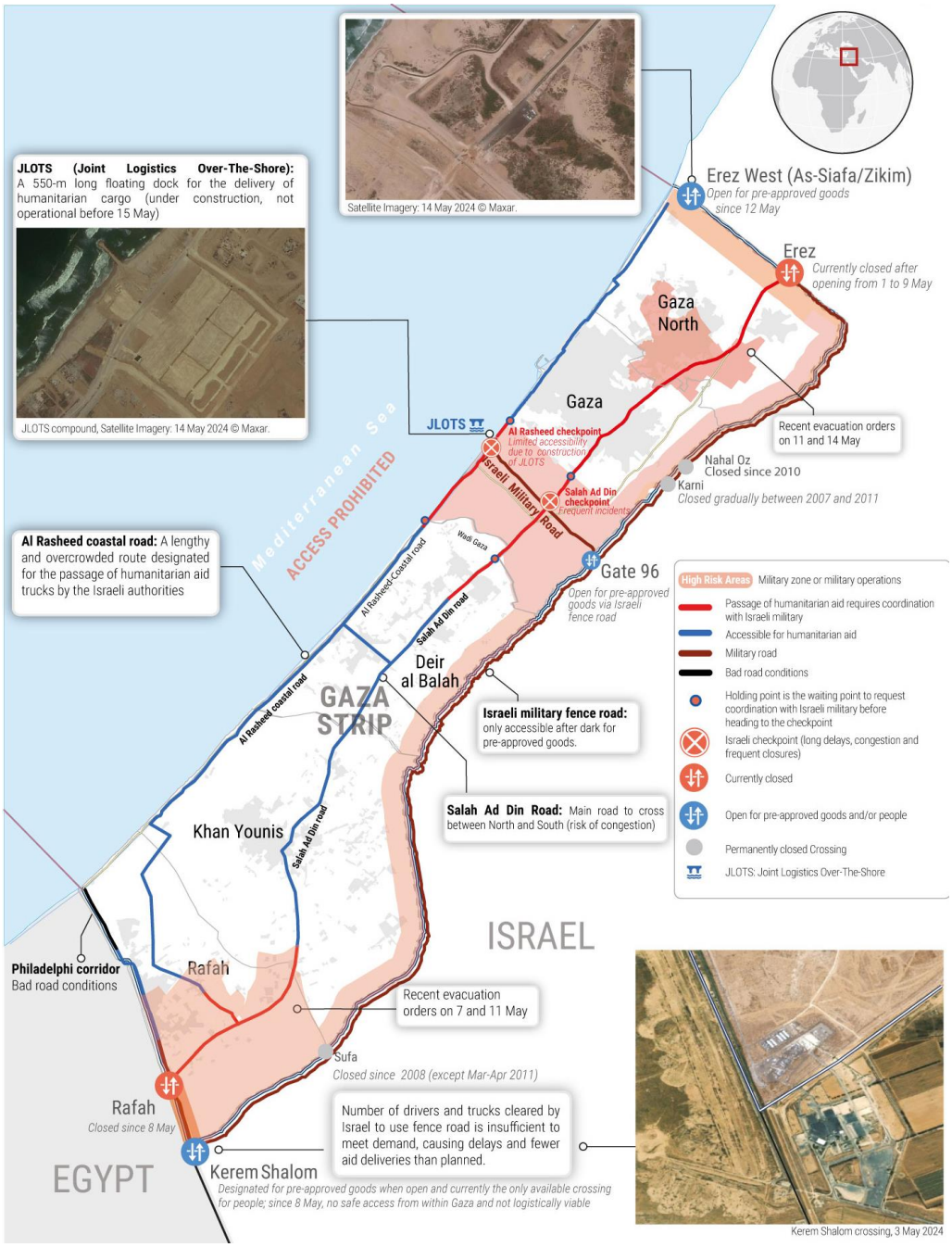

Figure 6. Language, Occupation, and Borders: Hebrew-Arabic Contact in Gaza Since 1967.

3. Language Shift and Cultural Integration

Language in the Gaza Strip is more than a medium of communication—it is a dynamic site of cultural negotiation and identity construction. As Gaza has undergone cycles of colonization, displacement, and modernization, its linguistic practices have shifted to reflect the region's evolving cultural landscape. This section examines how language shifts in Gaza are intertwined with educational policy, migration and exile, media and technology, and religious discourse. Together, these domains reveal how language functions as both a marker of cultural fusion and a strategy for navigating political, ideological, and global forces.

3.1. The Role of Education and Institutions

Throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, education has played a central role in shaping linguistic practices and cultural identity in Gaza. Language policy under successive regimes—Ottoman, British, Egyptian, Israeli, and Palestinian—has reflected competing ideologies of control, resistance, and cultural unification.

Under the British Mandate, English was promoted in elite education and civil administration, creating a linguistic divide between the ruling class and the local population. After 1948, Egyptian authorities emphasized Standard Arabic in schools as part of a pan-Arab nationalist agenda, aiming to instill a unified Arab identity and foster solidarity with Egypt. Following the 1967 Israeli occupation, Hebrew instruction was introduced in some public schools and vocational institutions, often framed as a practical necessity for labor mobility. However, this policy was met with resistance, especially during the First Intifada, when educators and communities rejected Hebrew as a language of occupation.

Since the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and later Hamas governance in Gaza, language policy has re-centered Arabic—particularly Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)—as a symbol of cultural pride and national legitimacy. Curricula emphasize Qur'anic Arabic, Arab literary traditions, and pan-Arab history. Textbooks frame language as a vehicle of resistance, identity, and moral instruction. In this context, the educational system becomes a powerful tool for shaping cultural consciousness, promoting a linguistically homogenized national narrative despite the region's inherent diversity and multilingual exposure.

3.2. Migration and Exile

Gaza's status as a space of displacement and migration has had a profound impact on its linguistic evolution. The influx of refugees after 1948 introduced diverse dialects from across historic Palestine, including Jaffa, Lod, Beersheba, and Hebron. Over time, these dialects converged into a distinct Gazan Arabic, shaped by shared refugee experiences and the pressures of camp life. Intergenerational language transmission became a central means of preserving memory and community identity, with older dialectal features slowly yielding to a more standardized local vernacular.

Diaspora communities—whether in Jordan, Lebanon, or the Gulf states—have also contributed to linguistic hybridity. Exposure to Gulf Arabic, particularly among families with members working in Saudi Arabia or the UAE, introduced new phonological and lexical elements. Words like khalas (enough), shay (tea), and bukrah (tomorrow) are used with slightly different intonation or meaning depending on regional influence. Similarly, Levantine Arabic from Syria and Lebanon, often encountered through media or interpersonal networks, has subtly affected expressions and vocabulary in urban Gaza.

Foreign aid workers and NGOs operating in Gaza have brought English and other European languages into limited but influential contact with local Arabic. While most interactions occur through interpreters, English terms related to humanitarian relief (shelter, voucher, training, emergency) have entered colloquial Arabic usage. These foreign influences do not threaten Arabic dominance, but they do contribute to a complex, adaptive linguistic environment shaped by global flows of people, power, and information.

3.3. Media, Technology, and Linguistic Modernity

The rise of satellite television, mobile phones, and social media has dramatically reshaped linguistic practices in Gaza. Beginning in the 1990s, pan-Arabic satellite channels like Al Jazeera and MBC introduced Gazans to a range of dialects from Morocco to the Gulf, while reinforcing Standard Arabic as the lingua franca of political discourse. Religious programming, Arabic dramas, and news coverage contributed to both linguistic standardization and a sense of cultural belonging to the wider Arab world.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and TikTok have created new spaces for language experimentation, particularly among youth. Code-switching between

Arabic and English—or between MSA and dialect—is common in text messages, memes, and captions. The use of Arabizi (Romanized Arabic with numbers representing Arabic sounds, such as "7" for ح) reflects a hybrid digital literacy that transcends traditional orthography. Slang terms from Egyptian and Lebanese pop culture, English loanwords (like, comment, post), and even remnants of Hebrew jargon appear in informal online discourse.

This linguistic hybridity reflects not only globalization but also the creative adaptability of Gaza's population. Youth in particular use language to navigate multiple identities—religious, national, cosmopolitan—and to assert agency within constrained physical and political spaces. While Standard Arabic remains dominant in official and religious contexts, the everyday speech of Gazans increasingly reflects a layered and dynamic linguistic modernity.

3.4. Language and Religion

Religion has long served as a stabilizing force in Gaza's linguistic landscape. Qur'anic Arabic, with its archaic grammatical structures and elevated lexicon, is considered the divine standard of the language and holds a privileged place in education, preaching, and moral instruction. Recitation of the Qur'an, memorization of Hadith, and participation in religious classes ensure that many Gazans—especially males—acquire high proficiency in Classical Arabic alongside the vernacular.

Religious institutions, including mosques and Islamic schools (madaris), promote a form of cultural Arabization that reinforces linguistic purity and moral clarity. Sermons delivered in MSA emphasize correct pronunciation and scriptural accuracy, contributing to the maintenance of a formal Arabic register distinct from the colloquial dialect. This distinction, however, is often blurred in religious media and popular preaching, where imams use a mix of colloquial and standard forms to maximize comprehension and emotional resonance.

Beyond Islam, language plays a role in Christian communities in Gaza as well. Though small in number, Christian schools and churches maintain Classical Arabic in liturgy and instruction, while also incorporating English for practical and cultural reasons. Thus, religious life serves both to preserve linguistic tradition and to adapt it to the spiritual needs of diverse communities.

In this context, religious discourse functions as a counterbalance to external linguistic pressures. It provides continuity in the face of rapid social change and political instability, reinforcing a shared cultural foundation rooted in the sacred authority of the Arabic language.

4. Case Studies

While large-scale historical and political forces have shaped Gaza's language evolution, the everyday experiences of its people reveal how language reflects identity, adaptation, and cultural integration. This section presents four real-life contexts in which language shift is visible: within refugee families, in the workplace, across the urban landscape, and on social media. These cases illustrate how ordinary Gazans use language to respond to their environment, assert their identity, and build community.

4.1. Intergenerational Language Change in Refugee Families

After the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced and resettled in Gaza. These refugees came from cities and villages across historical Palestine, bringing a wide variety of Arabic dialects with them. Older generations spoke in ways that reflected their place of origin—whether from urban Jaffa, rural Beersheba, or the hills of Hebron.

Over time, however, these different ways of speaking began to merge into a more unified local dialect, commonly known as Gazan Arabic. This shift happened naturally as

people from different backgrounds lived in close quarters in refugee camps, attended the same schools, and faced similar challenges.

In many families, grandparents still speak with unique expressions from their hometowns, while their grandchildren speak in a more uniform way that sounds distinctly "Gazan." This change is more than just linguistic—it reflects a shared identity built through collective experience. Although some older family members express sadness that their original dialects are disappearing, the new form of Arabic spoken in Gaza shows how language adapts to social realities, forming a new cultural unity out of diversity.

4.2. Language Mixing in Markets and Workplaces

In Gaza's markets, construction sites, and small businesses, many people use more than one language in daily life. Arabic is the main language, but people also use Hebrew and English depending on the situation.

For example, some merchants or laborers who used to work in Israel still use Hebrew words when talking to former coworkers or clients. These words might relate to prices, products, or tools. Meanwhile, English words are becoming more common, especially in small businesses and online shops. Phrases like "discount," "second-hand," or "order" are often used, especially by younger people or those working with international organizations.

This language mixing, or "code-switching," is not just practical—it also sends social signals. Using Hebrew may show past work experience or practicality, but it can also be controversial due to political tensions. In contrast, English is often seen as modern and prestigious. People may switch between languages to show politeness, education, or group belonging. These patterns show how language can express both identity and strategy in everyday interactions.

4.3. Language in the Urban Environment

The written language found in public places across Gaza—on shop signs, graffiti, government posters, and billboards—provides a visible record of cultural values, political messages, and economic trends.

In the city center, it's common to see shop signs that mix Arabic and English. A store might be called "Al-Nour Mobile Shop" or "Al-Amal Supermarket – Best Prices in Town." English is often used to make the business look more modern or international, especially when the target customers include youth or foreigners. In contrast, official government signs use formal Arabic, especially when referring to laws, services, or public announcements.

Graffiti and street art are also important parts of Gaza's "linguistic landscape." Messages on walls may include political slogans, religious verses, or tributes to those killed in conflict. Sometimes these messages are written in Arabic, and sometimes in English—especially if the message is meant for international viewers. For example, a slogan like "Free Gaza" might appear in English to attract global attention.

Even the choice of fonts, colors, and word order on signs tells a story. English lettering often suggests modernity or global connection. Religious text in Arabic suggests tradition and moral values. Together, these layers of language create a visual picture of Gaza's complex identity—rooted in Arab culture but also shaped by global influences and political struggles.

4.4. Youth Language and Social Media

For young people in Gaza, social media platforms like WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are central to daily communication. These platforms have created a new way of using language—one that is creative, flexible, and deeply personal.

Many young Gazans type Arabic words using English letters and numbers. This form of writing is known as "Arabic transliteration" or sometimes "Arabizi." For example, instead of using Arabic script, a word might be spelled using Latin letters that sound similar. Numbers are used to represent sounds that don't exist in English—like the number 3 for a deep throat sound, or 7 for a heavy "h" sound. While this system may seem strange to outsiders, it's fast and widely understood among youth.

Young people also mix Arabic with English words when texting, posting, or commenting. A message might include phrases like "Let's go!" or "I'm tired wallah," blending languages to match mood and context. Memes, jokes, and videos often reflect a mix of local slang, global internet culture, and political commentary.

This new digital language is a form of identity expression. It shows how youth in Gaza belong to both their local culture and a broader digital world. They use language to joke, to protest, to share emotions, and to build online communities. In a place where freedom of speech is limited, social media provides a powerful space for self-expression—and the way people use language there is both playful and meaningful.

5. Conclusion and Implications

The linguistic history of the Gaza Strip offers a compelling narrative of cultural resilience, adaptation, and hybridity. As this paper has demonstrated, language in Gaza is far more than a tool of communication—it is a living archive of the region's historical upheavals, colonial encounters, social struggles, and enduring identity formation. From the gradual fusion of dialects in refugee families to the strategic multilingualism in markets and the digital innovations of youth, Gaza's language practices reveal a society that is constantly negotiating the boundaries between tradition and modernity, resistance and adaptation.

The central thesis of this study—that language change in Gaza mirrors deeper processes of cultural integration shaped by both external pressures and internal agency—remains reinforced by the case studies explored. Gaza's linguistic evolution reflects a dual process: on one hand, the imposition of foreign languages and policies through colonization, occupation, and economic dependence; on the other, a grassroots adaptation where communities creatively reshape their linguistic environment in response to lived realities. This tension between the forced and the organic is what makes Gaza's linguistic landscape both complex and uniquely instructive.

These findings contribute to broader conversations in Middle Eastern sociolinguistics, particularly regarding how language can serve as a lens for studying postcolonial identity. In a region marked by overlapping histories of empire, displacement, and cultural struggle, Gaza's experience offers a microcosm of how language both absorbs and resists the forces of hegemony. It also speaks to the geopolitics of language: the choice to speak Arabic, English, or Hebrew in Gaza is never neutral—it is a reflection of power relations, historical memory, and visions for the future.

Looking forward, this study suggests several promising directions for further research. First, more empirical linguistic studies—including interviews, audio recordings, and longitudinal surveys—would help deepen our understanding of intergenerational change and dialect convergence in Gaza. Second, comparative research between Gazan communities and the Palestinian diaspora in countries like Jordan, Lebanon, or the Gulf could reveal how displacement shapes language differently across contexts. Third, there are clear policy implications for language education in Gaza: curricula that balance standard Arabic, local dialects, and foreign languages must be designed with sensitivity to both cultural preservation and economic opportunity.

In sum, the story of language in Gaza is a story of survival. It is the story of a people who, despite war, blockade, and displacement, continue to shape their identity through words—spoken, written, and now digitized. As Gaza evolves, so too does its language,

offering scholars a dynamic window into the social, political, and emotional life of one of the world's most contested regions.

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