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Specificity of the Analysis of Syrian Arabic Words and Expressions

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Abstract. In Arabic countries, the linguistic situation, characterized by diglossia, which manifests itself in the presence of colloquial variants as the primary means of communication and the literary Arabic language as the language of the official sphere, attracts the interest of sociolinguistic researchers and is a relevant issue of the Arabic linguistics. With the growing interest in Arabic dialects, there is an increasing need for accessible resources for linguists and those studying the Arabic language and its dialects. One of such resources is the multimedia dictionary of Arabic dialects we are now developing, which contains information about the phonetic and grammatical characteristics of words, their origins, syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations, as well as extralinguistic information about the concepts or objects they denote. The creation of a dictionary for the Syrian dialect, in light of the insufficiency of lexicographic resources, defines the novelty of this study. The analysis focuses on the lexical units from the Syrian dialect of the Arabic examined, regarding the stages of their selection and the characteristics which distinguish them from the units of the literary language for inclusion in the multimedia dictionary. The research material consists of dialect words obtained through a comprehensive sampling method from film discourse in the Syrian dialect of the Arabic. The result of this work is an algorithm developed by the authors, aimed at improving natural language processing, for analyzing dialectal lexical units and expressions in the Syrian dialect of the Arabic, allowing for the acquisition of the most complete information about their origins, phonetic and grammatical features.

Keywords: literary language, lexicography, arabic lexicology, multimedia dictionary, algorithm

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Специфика анализа сирийских диалектизмов арабского языка

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Аннотация. Языковая ситуация в арабских странах, характеризующаяся диглоссией, выражающейся наличием разговорных вариантов, выступающих основным средством общения, и литературного арабского языка как языка официальной сферы, вызывает интерес исследователей-социолингвистов и является актуальной проблемой арабского языкознания. С развитием интереса к диалектам арабского языка растет необходимость в доступных ресурсах для лингвистов и изучающих арабский язык и его диалекты. Таким ресурсом может служить разрабатываемый нами мультимедийный словарь диалектов арабского языка, содержащий информацию о фонетических, грамматических особенностях лексемы, ее происхождении, синтагматических и парадигматических связях, а также экстралингвистическую информацию о понятии или предмете, которые она номинует. Создание словаря сирийского диалекта арабского языка в условиях недостаточности лексикографических ресурсов определяет новизну исследования. *Предметом* анализа стали лексические единицы сирийского диалекта арабского языка, рассматриваемые с точки зрения этапов их отбора и особенностей их дифференциации с единицами литературного языка в целях включения в словник мультимедийного словаря. *Материал* исследования — диалектные слова, полученные методом сплошной выборки из кинодискурса на сирийском диалекте арабского языка. *Результатом* работы стал разработанный автором и направленный на улучшение обработки естественного языка алгоритм анализа диалектных лексических единиц и выражений на сирийском диалекте арабского языка, позволяющий получить наиболее полную информацию о происхождении, фонетических и грамматических особенностях языкового материала.

Ключевые слова: литературный язык, лексикография, арабская лексикология, мультимедийный словарь, алгоритм

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Introduction

The first dictionaries for the Arabic language (Modern Standard Arabic) focused on describing the vocabulary used in literary Arabic and were motivated by interest in the lexical units found in the Quran [1]. The dictionary could be organized according to one of the following principles:

1. Thematic, where the vocabulary was arranged on a conceptual basis: the dictionary “al-Muhasas”¹.
2. Alphabetical, where a large body of vocabulary was compiled in alphabetical order: the dictionary “al-Qamus al-Muhit”².

Lexicography of the Arabic language was not focused on recording dialectal lexemes. This was due to several reasons: primarily, the status of colloquial variants of the language was considered low. Moreover, they are the primary means of communication for Arabic speakers, which led to the necessity of strengthening the position of literary Arabic through its codification.

Today, many different dialects of Arabic have emerged, and the complexity of their lexicography is related not only to their diversity but also to their dynamic nature, which is motivated by various social and historical factors [2–5]. In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in studying and describing Arabic dialects, leading to the emergence of various dialect dictionaries³, as well as research dedicated to creating electronic resources [6], including dialectal ones [7–11].

Materials and methods

The lexical material was gathered through continuous sampling from the dialogues of characters in the Syrian TV series “The Neighbourhood’s Gate” and “A Lost Village”. The sample of dialectal units consists of 250 words and idioms, which will be incorporated into the forthcoming multimedia dictionary of dialectal vocabulary.

The main methods used in the research were: 1) descriptive method; 2) comprehensive sampling method; 3) survey; 4) statistical method.

Results of the study

Main Results of the Research:

- A relevant direction of work for researchers and lexicographers specializing in Arabic has been identified.

¹ ابن سيده المرسي الاندلسي (1996). المخصص. بيروت: دار احياء التراث العربي. (Al-Andalusi, A. (Ibn Sidah) (1996). Al-Muhasas. Beirut: Dar Ihiya Al-Turath Al-Arabi).

² القاموس المحيط. القاهرة: دار الحديث. (2013). *al-Firuzabadi* (2013). Al-Qamus al-Muhit, Cairo: Dar al-Hadith).

³ ٢٠١٢ وزارة الثقافة دمشق موسوعة العامية السورية الجزء الاول ياسين عبد الرحيم (Abd al-Rahim, Ya. (2012). Encyclopedia of the vocabulary of the Syrian dialect. Damascus : Publishing house of the Ministry of Culture).

- An algorithm developed by the author for selecting and analyzing Arabic dialectal lexical units and expressions has been proposed. It will subsequently be used to create a multimedia dictionary of dialects.
- A concept for the multimedia dictionary project of the Syrian dialect has been proposed.

Discussion

Arabic dialects are in close interaction with the codified literary Arabic language. Defining words that belong to the dialectal rather than the literary language poses certain difficulties. This interaction leads to partial overlap between the lexical systems, complicating the distinction between dialectal and literary vocabulary. The differentiation of dialects and Modern Standard Arabic in terms of their spheres of functioning, where dialects serve as means of communication in everyday life, while literary Arabic is a means of communication in the official sphere, is not always distinctly defined: dialects can also be used in some formal situations, erasing the boundary between the “high” literary and “low” forms of the language [12–16]. For instance, in 2023, during the annual World Government Summit in the United Arab Emirates, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi predominantly used the Egyptian Arabic in his speech: *انا عايز أجابه التحديات دي كلها مرة وحدة* [ana ʕaez agabeh attahadiyat di kullaha marra wahda] meaning ‘I want to respond to all these challenges at once’⁴.

Sociolinguistic factors, including the prestigious status of the literary language and the lower social status of its dialects, lead to code-switching among Arabic speakers between dialect and literary language depending on the situation. This code-switching and significant regional variability of Arabic dialects make it challenging to draw a clear boundary between them and literary Arabic.

A unique language continuum is formed, within which it is often difficult to unambiguously classify a particular linguistic unit as belonging to literary Arabic or a specific dialect [17]. To identify a dialectal lexeme, a comprehensive analysis of its characteristics is necessary:

a) Phonetic Analysis

One reason for the differences among Arabic dialects that complicate communication between speakers of different dialects is the divergence in pronunciation norms [18–20]. In the first stage, we consider it essential to analyze the phonetic structure of the word to identify its features, including the presence of specific sounds and differences from the literary norm.

⁴ Proceedings of the World Government Summit on February 13–15, 2023 [Electronic resource] URL: <https://www.worldgovernmentsummit.org/ar/events/2023/world-government-summit-2023> (accessed: 08.07.2024).

In most dialects, three short and long vowels are preserved: [a], [i], [u], [a:], [i:], [u:]. However, their realization may vary depending on the region. In the Syrian dialect of Arabic, the following territorial differentiation is observed: the sound [a] in Aleppo may shift to [e:], while in Tartus, [a] is replaced by [o], whereas in Damascus, [a] is retained (Table 1).

Table 1

Pronunciation of the vowel [a] in different regions of Syria

	عامل [ʕamelʔ] ‘worker’	ماشى [mashʔi] ‘ладно’
	Pronunciation	
Damascus	[ʕamelʔ]	[mashʔi]
Tartus	[ʕomelʔ]	[moshʔi]
Aleppo	[ʕemelʔ]	[meshʔi]

Source: Aida D. Haddad’s Research

The position of vowels in a word is a key factor determining their quality in Arabic dialects. At the beginning of a word, vowels most often retain their pronunciation close to literary Arabic. In the middle of a word, vowels may be reduced and undergo significant changes depending on the dialect:

(1) In the Syrian Arabic the diphthong [ai] in the word بيت ‘house’, is replaced by [e], and the lexeme is pronounced as [bet] instead of [bart].

Differences in the pronunciation of consonants are also an important distinguishing feature between Arabic dialects. These differences affect both classical consonantal phonemes and specific consonants characteristic of individual dialects. One of the key discrepancies concerns the realization of classical emphatic consonants ([tʕ], [dʕ], [sʕ], [zʕ]). In some dialects, these consonants are preserved. However, more often, emphatic consonants lose their distinct articulation and approach regular non-emphatic consonants:

(2) نظام [nizʕam] — نزام [nizam] ‘regime’.

(3) صغير [sʕiɣiɾ] — سغير [syɾ] ‘small’.

Another significant difference in phonetics is related to the pronunciation of the literary sound [kʕ]. In most dialects, it is preserved, for example, in Syria — in the city of Latakia. However, in other regions, the sound undergoes changes, and in dialects, it is most often realized as a glottal stop [ʔ] (glottal plosive), a variant characteristic of the capital:

(4) قال [kʕal] in Latakia and نال [ʔal] ‘said’ — in Damascus.

Additionally, some dialects demonstrate the use of specific consonants that are absent in literary Arabic. For instance, in the Egyptian dialect, [ʒ] is replaced by the dialectal [g]. In the Syrian dialect, this sound is realized in borrowed vocabulary, graphically denoted by using غ [gʕ], and less frequently ح [ʒ]:

(5) تَغ [tāg] ‘tag’ — borrowed from the internet discourse of the English language.

A borrowed lexical unit is considered to be successfully assimilated into Arabic when it is fully adapted to the phonetic and grammatical system of literary Arabic. In literary Arabic, there are clear phonetic rules regulating the combination and order of sounds in words [21]. Adherence to these rules is an important criterion for determining the degree of Arabization of a given lexeme. Thus, the combination of sounds [kʕ] and [ʒ] is an indicator of the borrowing of a word, as such a combination is not permissible in native Arabic roots:

(6) بَقْجَة [baqʕja] ‘bag’ (borrowing from Turkish — *bohça* ‘package’).

Thus, the first necessary step in differentiating a lexical unit from that of Modern Standard Arabic, and subsequently to a specific Arabic dialect, is the analysis of its phonetic composition. Analyzing the phonetic characteristics of words helps in forming an understanding of dialectal phonetic features, and identifying regular sound correspondences allows for tracing the historical development of the lexeme.

b) Grammatical Analysis

One of the key characteristics of dialects is their deviation from the grammatical norm of Modern Standard Arabic. This manifests in various aspects of the grammatical system [22]. In the area of morphology, the Syrian dialect simplifies the case system by truncating certain case endings and vowel markings in nouns and adjectives:

(7) اريد جوز [uridu jāwzan] — بدي جوز [bididi joz] (Syrian dialect) ‘I want a walnut’. In the dialect, the accusative case ending “an” is lost in the lexeme جوز ‘walnut.’

Changes occur in the paradigms of word forms, including personal pronouns — the forms of dual masculine and feminine gender are lost, as well as the feminine plural forms:

(8) انتما الاثنين [antumā al’ithnā] — انتو الاثنين [intu al’tinīn] ‘you (both)’ (Syrian dialect).

Dialects demonstrate a simplification of the verbal system, reducing the number of conjugation forms [22]:

(9) انتما ايضاً عرفتما؟ [antumā aydan ‘ariftumā] ‘Did you (two) also know?’ (literary) — انتوا كمان عرفتوا؟ [intu kamān ‘ariftu] ‘Did you (two) also know?’ (Syrian dialect). In this example, the second-person dual pronoun انتما and its clitic form in the verb “to know” are replaced by the second-person plural pronoun and its corresponding clitic form.

A common feature of dialectal syntax is the replacement of case by syntactic connections governed by prepositions. In literary Arabic, case endings play an important role in expressing syntactic relationships, whereas in many dialects, prepositions replace or complement case markers:

(10) كتاب الطالب [kitābu al-ṭālibi] ‘the book of the student’ (literary) — الكتاب تبع الطالب [al-kitāb taba‘ al-ṭālib] ‘the book of the student’ (Syrian dialect).

Additionally, certain dialects, including the Syrian dialect, are characterized by a broader use of auxiliary verbs, such as *كان* [kān] ‘to be,’ to express various grammatical meanings. This is associated with a general tendency towards analyticism in Arabic dialects:

(11) The construction *كان عم يكتب*: *كان عم يفعل* [kān ‘am yaktub] ‘was writing’ is used to convey a prolonged action in the past (Past Continuous in English), in contrast to the simple past tense in literary Arabic.

c) Etymology

Identifying the origin and development of a word is an important aspect for understanding how and in what meaning a lexeme appeared in the dialect, and what historical and cultural factors influenced its formation. To determine the etymology of a word in Arabic, it is necessary to:

- Search for the Lexeme in the Dictionary of Modern Standard Arabic.

The presence of a lexeme in a dictionary cannot be regarded as an unambiguous indicator of its literary origin, as high frequency of usage in speech may lead to the fixation of its semantics in the dictionary regardless of its etymology. This applies to lexical units that originally had conversational or dialectal origins, as some dictionaries may lexicograph not only literary vocabulary but also colloquial, jargon, and dialect words. To obtain information about a word’s belonging to a dialect, an analysis of the context of usage and the history of the lexeme is necessary.

The discovery of a dialectal lexical unit in the dictionary can facilitate the process of establishing its meaning and the time of its appearance in the language; moreover, the interpretation of colloquial and dialectal lexemes usually occurs by indicating the literary equivalent. Since notes on the origin of a word are not a systematic characteristic of the dictionary, it is essential first to compare the dialectal word with the equivalent lexeme in Modern Standard Arabic. This will allow for the identification of kinship (if any) and to establish whether this lexeme is originally Arabic or has been borrowed.

- Comparison the Lexeme with Other Arabic Dialects:

Comparing the dialectal word with equivalents from other geographically close Arabic dialects can help trace the regional features of the formation and development of the lexeme. Identifying common or distinguishing traits will indicate the degree of kinship between dialects and possible pathways for borrowing lexical units due to the historical interaction of speakers from different dialects.

- Comparison with Related Semitic Languages:

Comparing the dialectal word with the vocabulary of other Semitic languages that previously existed in the territory where the studied dialect is spoken may reveal archaic roots and connections. At this stage, it is possible to determine whether the word is common Semitic or a result of later borrowings. Relevant dictionaries (if available) or scholarly works of an etymological nature can serve as sources for this material.

- **Historical-Linguistic Analysis:**

Studying the sociocultural factors that influenced the formation of dialectal vocabulary, considering the historical contexts in which the dialect functioned, and the contacts of its speakers with speakers of other languages in the region are necessary for establishing the etymology of words. For instance, colonization is one of the reasons for the emergence of dialect words with foreign origins [23]. In conducting the analysis, consulting explanatory dictionaries of the languages with which the speakers of the dialect interacted is an important step in establishing the origin of the word (In Syria — Syriac, Persian, French, Turkish languages).

- **Paremic corpus:**

Given that dialects are the primary means of everyday communication, the paremic corpus (proverbs, sayings, and other fixed expressions) is rich with established dialectal forms. Paroemia represents a significant part of any natural language and is a product of living folk speech, reflecting the characteristics of the language and/or regional Arabic dialect, including its phonetic, lexical, and grammatical features. Studying the paremic corpus contributes to understanding the context of dialectal words used in the speech of native speakers. Many dialectal units and expressions are indeed fixed within the paremia:

(12) ايدي بزناارك [idi bzennaarak] ‘to plead’ (lit. ‘my hand on your waist’).

In this phraseological expression, the archaic word زنار [zanār] is used, which has a related meaning and can only be used in this combination. This term previously referred to a belt of a specific color that Christians wore in the Levant.

(13) عقله جوزتين بخرج [‘aqluh joztein b’ikh’irj] ‘a foolish person’ (lit. ‘his brain is two nuts in a sack’).

The lexeme خرج [kh’irj] previously denoted a large sack that was convenient for storing and carrying items on one’s shoulder. Today, the word has fallen out of use and remains only within the phraseological expression.

Analysis of the Syrian Dialect Lexeme

We will analyze the lexeme طنجرة [tanğara] meaning ‘pot’, which appears in the Syrian idiomatic expression طنجرة ولقت غطاها [tanğara u laʔet ġaṭāhā] (literally ‘a pot and it found its lid’, equivalent to the English expression ‘two of a kind’):

a. **Phonetic Aspect:**

The phonetic composition of the lexeme طنجرة reveals an unusual combination of sounds [t] and [ʒ] that is not characteristic of literary Arabic. The presence of such a combination indicates that this word was borrowed from another language and is not originally Arabic. This combination of sounds in Syrian dialects is typically found in words borrowed from Persian or Turkish.

b. **Grammatical Features:**

At the grammatical level, one can observe the loss of case markers. From the perspective of literary Arabic, the case ending in this position of the lexeme should

be [on] (nominative case). Additionally, the expression exhibits a violation of word order; however, in this case, it cannot be attributed to dialectal origins, as the inversion is more of an artistic device.

c. Etymology:

Searching for information about the unit in etymological dictionaries seems appropriate due to the establishment of an unusual sound combination in the lexeme that is not typical of literary Arabic. One such work is “Interpretation of Foreign Words in the Arabic Language”⁵, first published in 1932. This dictionary presents a list of borrowed lexical units from various languages, arranged alphabetically, along with their semantics and etymology. The author aims to establish the origins of words for their replacement with native Arabic vocabulary and to eradicate borrowings. The lexeme طنجرة ‘pot’ is a borrowing from Turkish, specifically from the word tencere ‘pot/kettle’. It is included in the explanatory dictionary of the Arabic language and is interpreted with the literary equivalent قِدر [qidr], which in turn is described as “a cooking vessel (feminine, can be used in masculine form)” (Fig. 1, Fig 2) and is literally translated into Russian as pot, kettle, or small pot in the “Arabic-Russian Dictionary” by Kh.K. Baranov⁶.

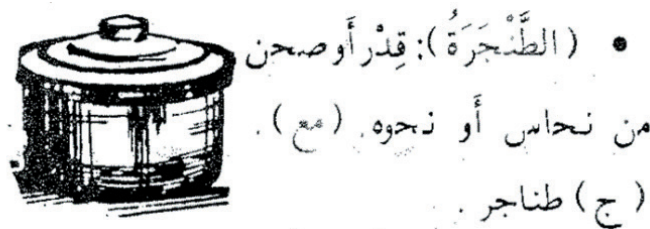


Fig. 1. The meaning of the word طنجرة in the dictionary

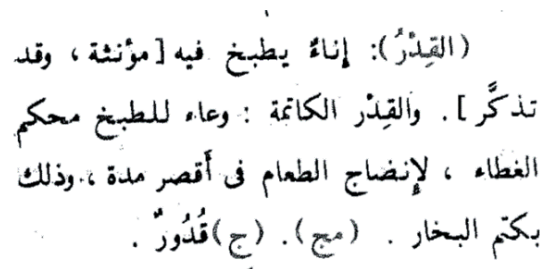


Fig. 2. The meaning of the word قِدر in the dictionary
Source: Aida D. Haddad's Research

⁵ (Al-Anisi, T. Interpretation of Foreign Words in the Arabic Language. Egypt: Dar al-Bestani. 2008) العنيسي طوبيا (٢٠٠٨). تفسير الالفاظ الدخيلة في اللغة العربية. مصر: دار البستاني

⁶ Баранов Х.К. Арабско-русский словарь [Электронный ресурс] URL: <http://arabus.ru> (дата обращения: 08.07.2024). (Baranov, K.H. Arabic-Russian Dictionary [Electronic Resource] URL: <http://arabus.ru> (accessed: July 8, 2024))

d. Usage in idioms:

As previously shown, the lexeme is used in the expression: *طنجرة ولقت غطاها* [taṅğara u laʔet ɣaṭāhā] ‘two of a kind’. This expression consists of four components:

- Noun *طنجرة* [taṅğara] ‘pot’.
- Conjunction *و* [u] ‘and’.
- Verb *لقت* [laʔet] ‘found’. The formation of this verb form is motivated by the literary Arabic word *لقيه* [luqiya] ‘finding’ according to the literary word formation model *فَعَّلَ* (for feminine *فَعَّلَتْ*).
- Noun *غطاها* [ɣaṭāhā] is derived from the literary variant *غطاء* [ɣiṭāʔ] by truncating the glottal stop. This word has multiple meanings and is defined in the dictionary as “that which covers an object, concealing it”. The lexeme can also refer to a blanket.

Originally, the expression had a positive connotation and was used to denote a pair in marriage where the spouses have mutual understanding. Today, the context of use has expanded: the expression can be used with both positive and negative connotations, for example, regarding unpleasant people who are in friendly or marital relationships. The lexeme *طنجرة* is not fixed and can be used outside of this idiomatic expression to mean ‘pot’.

To understand the place of the literary and dialectal variants of the word for ‘pot’, a survey was conducted among 55 respondents from various regions of Syria: Damascus, Deir ez-Zor, Latakia, Tartus, Aleppo, aged from 18 to 67 years.

The aim of the study was to compare the lexical units *قِدْر* [qidr] and *طنجرة* [taṅğara] ‘pot’ in the vocabulary of Arabic speakers and its dialects. The organization of the study was based on the hypothesis that the literary variant of the lexeme for ‘pot’ is less recognizable due to its transition into passive vocabulary. The survey was conducted using the technical capabilities of the Internet on a voluntary basis among respondents. Primary mathematical processing methods (calculating percentage shares) were used for data analysis.

The task included:

- An open-ended question: “What is a pot?” (indicating the literary lexeme — *قِدْر* [qidr]);
- An image of a pot was provided with a request to name the object.

The primary analysis of the empirical material led to the identification of the following groups of responses:

1. To the first question:

- Container (large/for food) — 23 respondents (41 %);
- Cooking/boiling vessel — 18 respondents (32 %);
- Destiny — 7 respondents (12 %);
- I don’t know — 4 respondents (7 %);
- Bottle — 2 respondents (3 %).

A visual analysis of the empirical material indicates that the decrease in the number of correct answers is directly proportional to the decrease in the age of the respondents (Table 2).

Table 2

The results of the survey. Age criteria

	Age category		
	18–25	26–34	35–60
Bottle	0	2	0
Container	16	7	0
Pot	4	10	4
Fate	3	1	3
I don't know	4	0	0

Source: Aida D. Haddad's Research

2. To the second question:
- **طنجرة** [tanğara] ‘pot’ (dialect word) — 55 respondents;
 - 2 respondents, in addition to the dialectal variant of the lexeme, indicated the literary equivalent (aged 23 and 28).

Upon examining the survey results, one can conclude that the lexical unit **قدير** [qidr] is losing its meaning of ‘pot’ in favor of a more generalized meaning of ‘container’. This change in semantics can be explained by a tendency towards language simplification. The lexeme **قدير** [qidr] has similarities with the word **قدر** [qadar] ‘destiny’, with the phonetic composition of the lexical units differing by only two vowel markings, which may cause confusion in denoting concepts. This is indicated by the corresponding responses to the first task.

The results of the second task confirm that the colloquial variant of the term has become more popular among language speakers. This may suggest that the younger generation prefers to use more universal and comprehensible words that are easier to perceive in everyday speech.

Multimedia Dictionary Project

When accessing the dictionary, the user is presented with basic information that includes: transcription, grammatical commentary, interpretation, literary variant of the word, and an image of the object (Fig. 3).

طنجرة

Phonetic transcription: [tanjara].

Grammatical characteristics: noun, feminine gender, singular.

Definition: a container made of metal, used for cooking; cookware;

Literary equivalent: **قدير** [k'idr] noun, masculine gender.



Fig. 3. Project of the Multimedia Dictionary of the Syrian Dialect: Example of a Dictionary Entry
Source: Aida D. Haddad's Research

If necessary, the user can access additional information available on supplementary tabs, which include: the etymology of the lexeme, information about proverbs that include the word, examples of usage in context (s), as well as video/audio material demonstrating the use of the lexical unit in speech (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Project of the Multimedia Dictionary of the Syrian Dialect: Example of a Dictionary Entry, Additional Information
Source: Aida D. Haddad's Research

Conclusion

The dialects of the Arabic language are characterized by the presence of a large amount of borrowed vocabulary, the formation of lexical units based on Arabic roots and expressions, as well as the development of new meanings for already existing words. This diversity in vocabulary is related to the flexibility and dynamism of dialects compared to literary Arabic; dialects quickly respond to social changes and express concepts relevant to the local community.

Due to various geopolitical factors, Arabic speakers have actively interacted with speakers of other languages, leading to the incorporation of a significant number of borrowings into the spoken variants of the language, reflecting new realities, concepts, and phenomena.

A comprehensive approach to analyzing a lexeme, taking into account the characteristics of its phonetic structure, grammar, semantics, and historical factors, allows for the most accurate determination of the word's affiliation to a particular dialect and its etymology.

The work presents an algorithm for analyzing a lexical unit; however, not every stage mentioned is mandatory. In each specific situation, the approach to analysis should be individual and flexible, as it is necessary to adapt the analysis to the characteristics of the lexeme in question and the tasks at hand. Thus, comparing the word with equivalents from other Arabic dialects is not mandatory when there is established information about its foreign origin.

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