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Socially Embedded Grammaticalisation: The Progressive *ma-* in Tartus, Syria

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Abstract

The progressive in Syrian Arabic offers a near-textbook grammaticalisation cline, ranging from *ʕammāl* 'working' to the particle *ʕam* and the phonetically reduced prefix *ma-*. Such clines are usually explained through internal mechanisms; whether social forces can constrain, deflect or arrest them has received far less attention. This study asks whether the coexistence of *ʕam* and *ma-* in the Tartus dialect of Syrian Arabic is socially embedded. Drawing on 590 progressive tokens from 144 speakers, we model the choice between the two markers with mixed-effects logistic regression (with speaker as a random intercept), testing geography, religion, age and gender, and complement the models with glossed corpus examples and an analysis of variant dominance. Religion, geography and age emerge as significant predictors, with Alawite, rural and older speakers favouring *ma-*. Among urban Alawites, *ma-* falls from 66.0% of progressive tokens among speakers over 50 to 17.7% among those aged 18 to 30, and women aged 18 to 30 do not use it at all, although the gender difference does not reach significance. Among rural Alawites, *ma-* accounts for about half or more of the progressive tokens at every age. Non-Alawites, in urban and rural settings alike, choose *ʕam* in nearly nine of every ten tokens. One cline thus yields three outcomes: maintenance in the rural heartland, recession in the city and restricted diffusion beyond the Alawite community. Comparative evidence from the Alawite dialects of Hatay and Cilicia suggests that the communal contrast continues an older areal one, between mountain and urban dialects, which migration into the city has reallocated to social groups. Internal mechanisms supply the cline; social structure, we argue, decides how far, and amongst whom, its most advanced stage travels.

Keywords: grammaticalisation; progressive aspect; variationist sociolinguistics; morphosyntactic variation; Arabic dialectology; social stratification; Syrian Arabic; Tartus dialect; language variation and change

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1. Introduction

1.1. Internally and Externally Motivated Accounts of Language Variation and Change

Every grammatical marker has a biography. Before it settles into a paradigm as a particle or a prefix, it has led a life as a content word, with a meaning and a syntactic home of its own. Research on the pathways of variation and change in Arabic has, of late, engaged ever more closely with the framework that writes such biographies, namely, grammaticalisation, which concerns itself with the manner in which lexical items and constructions are transformed

and come to serve grammatical functions (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Studies in this vein have documented internally driven mechanisms like semantic bleaching, phonetic erosion and morphosyntactic reanalysis (Abdel-Hafiz, 2005; Esseesy, 2010; Jarad, 2014a, 2015, 2017; Al-Raba'a, 2023; Alharthy, 2024; Jaradat et al., 2024; Husein & Al-Shawashreh, 2025, among many others), and they have traced recurrent internal pathways with no little success. Jarad (2014b), for instance, follows the motion verb *rāḥ* 'go' to the future marker *raḥ* in Syrian Arabic through semantic, morphological and phonetic shifts. Work on Jordanian Arabic shows that a motion verb may branch into several grammaticalised meanings, with different stages coexisting synchronically (Jaradat et al., 2024), and the emergence of /d-/ as a future prefix in the dialect of Irbid has been traced along a comparable cline, from lexical volition to a reduced future marker (Husein & Al-Shawashreh, 2025). Taken together, these studies constitute sound evidence that Arabic offers a particularly fertile terrain for tracing the internal architecture of grammatical change. Far less examined is whether the social ecologies in which such forms unfold can bend or arrest these internal trajectories.

It is on this latter question that variationist sociolinguistics has, over the decades, built a substantial explanatory apparatus. Studies in the Labovian tradition have shown that the emergence and spread of linguistic variants are governed by macro-social factors like class, gender, age and geography (Labov, 1972, 1994). The Levant has supplied some of the clearest cases. Habib's (2010) study of rural migrants who relocated to the Syrian city of Hims (Homs) showed how readily they recalibrated their pronunciation of the rural [q]: age, gender and neighbourhood density exerted a perceptible pull towards the urban glottal stop [ʔ], with women conspicuously at the forefront of the realignment. Daher (1998), working in Damascus, found that men with more education tended towards the standard [q], whereas women gravitated to the urban [ʔ], a pattern bound up with the projection of modernity and femininity. Abdel-Jawad (1981) and Al-Wer (2007) found that rural migrants to Amman acquire urban ways of speaking at different speeds depending on gender and generation, and Cotter's (2016) research on Gaza showed that gender and the dialect of upbringing shape the realisation of (q), with young men turning back to the local [g] to signal who they are.

Al-Wer et al. (2022) carry the argument further, contending that change in Arabic vernaculars does not always follow the trajectories that internal phonology would predict, and that social constraints are central to explaining the outcomes actually observed. Their cases, like most of those above, concern phonological and morphophonological variables. Grammatical variables have not been absent from Arabic sociolinguistics, however. Al-Wer (2020) shows how dialect contact in Amman reshaped competing grammatical forms, the second-person plural suffix amongst them, into new community norms. Talay (1999) records that speakers of the Khawētna dialect in eastern Syria use the koine-borrowed progressive marker *ʕam* alongside the local *qēʕəd*, and AlShihry (2017), in a cross-dialectal study of durative markers, describes *ʕam* as the urban form of the Levant. Mansfield (2025), reviewing an informal sample of variationist studies that spans 63 languages from 26 families, adds a typological caution. In his reading, variation in the form of a grammatical marker tends to correlate with social categories, whereas the grammaticalisation of new markers tends to proceed "slowly and without social signalling" (p. 2).

Such studies show, with some force, that linguistic variation is neither random nor socially unmoored. It is patterned by social structure and deeply imbricated in questions of mobility, affiliation and identity.

1.2. The Missing Integrated Model

The differing orientations of grammaticalisation studies and variationist sociolinguistics have left a conspicuous gap in our understanding of language change. Grammaticalisa-

tion research has developed powerful models of internally motivated change, which account for the way lexical items undergo semantic bleaching, phonetic erosion and morphosyntactic reanalysis along recurrent pathways (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). These models have tended, however, to treat speech communities as homogeneous, as though a change, once set in motion, reached every speaker at much the same pace (Nevalainen & Palander-Collin, 2011). Traugott (2011, p. 24) is admirably explicit on the point. She separates the actualisation of a change within the linguistic system from its "actualization across speakers, spaces, and time", often called "social gradualness", and sets the latter aside. How geography, faith, social class and gender might shape the path of a grammatical change, and not merely its speed, has seldom been asked; even recent descriptive work on Arabic closes by calling for research on how grammaticalised forms "are perceived and used across different social strata or regions" (Alharthy, 2024, p. 142).

Variationist sociolinguistics, on the other side of the disciplinary divide, has built equally capable models of externally motivated change, explaining how variants become socially stratified, how they spread or recede, and which social groups lead, accelerate or resist change (Labov, 1994, 2001). Yet this tradition has rarely allowed the idea of a grammaticalisation cline to shape its questions. Does a variant's position on a pathway that runs from lexical to grammatical to phonetically reduced affect the way it travels through society? Can social forces halt a cline midway? Croft's (2000) evolutionary account of language change suggests where the two traditions might meet. It separates innovation, the emergence of a new variant through the reanalysis of form and function, from propagation, the selection and spread of that variant through a community, and it attributes propagation to social mechanisms such as accommodation and the signalling of identity. Grammaticalisation theory has a great deal to say about innovation, and variationist sociolinguistics about propagation; the two have seldom been brought to bear on the same cline in the same community.

It is at this intersection that the more pressing questions arise. Can social forces constrain a grammaticalisation cline? Could its most advanced form fail to diffuse, or even lose ground, because of the social company it keeps? And if so, through what mechanisms?

The enquiry is in tandem with what scholars of Arabic sociolinguistics are now advocating, namely, research that is locally situated and does not merely reproduce inherited binaries or external explanatory frames (Habib, 2025). The present paper addresses the gap by examining the progressive aspect in Tartus, Syria, where two points on a grammaticalisation cline, *ʕam* and the phonetically more reduced *ma-*, coexist in synchronic variation.

It would be pertinent, at this point, to state the objective of the paper plainly. Describing where *ʕam* and *ma-* occur is only the first step. What we seek to explain is why a cline whose innovation is complete propagates so unevenly through one speech community, and what that unevenness tells us about the place of social structure in grammaticalisation theory. Our answer is partly synchronic. The stages of the cline have been reallocated to social groups, and they are retained or given up along with those groups. It is also historical, since the communal contrast continues an older areal one, between the dialects of the coastal mountains and the urban dialects of the Levant, which migration into the city turned into a social contrast (Section 4.2). The contribution we claim follows from the two together. The fate of a grammaticalising form depends on the history of the communities that carry it, and a theory of grammaticalisation that attends to innovation alone can account for only part of that fate.

1.3. The Setting and the Variable

1.3.1. Context

The coastal city of Tartus offers a fertile testing ground for bringing grammaticalisation and variationist sociolinguistics into one analytical frame. Tartus remains one of the most

under-researched dialect regions of Syria (Procházka, 2013; De Blasio, 2022), and its linguistic ecology was moulded by demographic shifts in the second half of the twentieth century. Historically, the city was dominated by Sunni and Christian communities, whereas the surrounding hinterland was predominantly Alawite; until the French Mandate, virtually no Alawites lived in urban areas (Balanche, 2015). After the Ba'ath Party came to power in 1963, large-scale rural-to-urban migration brought Alawite families from the mountainous countryside into the coastal towns (Balanche, 2006), and Alawites now form the majority of the population of Tartus (Balanche, 2015). The migration brought the rural population into closer proximity with the urban one, although contact remained spatially constrained in its earlier stages: rural migrants tended to settle in neighbourhoods alongside others of similar origin, a pattern familiar from migration studies and documented for Tartus itself (Mohamad, 2023b, p. 6). Rural linguistic features thus entered into uneven relations of accommodation, competition, retention and suppression. Tartus became, in other words, the kind of socio-historical setting in which the fate of a grammaticalising form could be expected to hinge less on its internal structural momentum than on the social ecology into which it was carried.

1.3.2. The Variable

The progressive aspect is one such variable. In Tartus, the progressive alternates between two markers, the free particle *ʕam* and the bound prefix *ma-*.[1] Both are standardly traced to *ʕammāl* 'working, busy doing', which Sellami (2022, pp. 564–565) identifies as a hyperbolic (intensive) participle of the *faʕʕāl* pattern, built on the root ʕ-m-l 'work, do'. The three forms lie on a classic cline of semantic bleaching, phonetic erosion and morphological fusion (Hopper & Traugott, 2003), on which they are ordered here by degree of reduction:

ʕammāl (lexical), *ʕam* (progressive particle), *ma-* (phonetically reduced prefix)[2]

Overt progressive marking of this kind sits comfortably with formal semantic work arguing that the imperfective verb of Standard Arabic is aspectually unmarked, with progressive readings derived from a covert operator which, as Hallman (2015, p. 129) observes, is "overtly lexicalized in some modern dialects". In Tartus, *ʕam* and *ma-* are two such lexicalisations.

The reduced variant surfaces as a prefix attached directly to the imperfect verb. So, the meaning 'he is swimming' is rendered in rural Alawite speech as in (1a) and in urban speech as in (1b).[3]

(1) a. *ma-y-esbaḥ*
PROG-3SG.M-swim.IMPF
'He is swimming.' (rural Alawite)

b. *ʕam* *y-esbaḥ*
PROG 3SG.M-swim.IMPF
'He is swimming.' (urban)

Comparable constructions run through the Levantine dialect continuum, as the following examples from Damascus and Beirut show (transcription adapted):

(2) *l-mʔadden* *ʕam* *iʔadden* *l-ʔadān*
DEF-muezzin PROG 3SG.M.call.IMPF DEF-call_to_prayer
'The muezzin is giving the call to prayer.' (Damascus; Cowell, 1964, p. 320)

(3) *huwwe* *ʕam* *yiḍrub* *xayy-u* *halla*
he PROG 3SG.M.hit.IMPF brother-3SG.M now
'He is thrashing his brother at the moment.' (Beirut; Bruweleit, 2015, p. 120)

The coexistence of more and less grammaticalised forms is a well-documented principle, generally known as 'layering'. In Hopper's words, "within a broad functional domain, new layers are continually emerging. As this happens, the older layers are not necessarily discarded but may remain to coexist with and interact with the newer layers" (Hopper, 1991, p. 22). Such layers, he adds, "may be specialized for particular lexical items, particular classes of constructions, or sociolinguistic registers" (p. 23), a possibility the present study takes up directly. The Arabic progressive is itself a celebrated case. In Levantine and Iraqi dialects, "the progressive has three coexisting forms reflecting all the different grammaticalization stages" (Ouali, 2022, p. 126), as with Levantine *ʕammāl*, *ʕamm(a)* and *ʕam*, and Iraqi *gāʕid*, *gāʕ* and *ga*. Beyond the progressive, Alharthy (2024, p. 134) reports for Bisha Colloquial Arabic that grammaticalised modal, tense and aspectual forms have not displaced their lexical sources.

The Tartus markers instantiate precisely such layering. The more grammaticalised *ma-* is a bound prefix, whereas the less grammaticalised *ʕam* is a free particle that precedes the verb. The two differ in bondedness as well: *ʕam* can be separated from the verb by the optional indicative prefix *b-* (*ʕam y-esbaḥ* ~ *ʕam b-y-esbaḥ* 'he is swimming'), whereas *ma-* cannot, being fused with the imperfect verb (AlShihry, 2017, p. 91). A conventional reading would treat the choice between them as a matter of semantic nuance, or as an internal outcome of the cline. We ask instead whether this layering is socially embedded, testing the effects of geography, religion, age and gender on the choice between *ʕam* and *ma-* in the Tartus speech community.

1.4. The Progressive in Arabic Dialectology

The progressive marker of Syrian Arabic is well established in the descriptive literature. Sellami's (2022) typology of progressive constructions in Arabic dialects distinguishes Zero-PROG, Emergent-PROG and Categorical-PROG systems and places Levantine Arabic, exemplified by Damascus, in the last group, in which a dedicated progressive marker is used obligatorily. On the source of the marker, the literature speaks with two voices. Ouali (2022, pp. 122, 125) derives the Levantine forms *ʕammāl*, *ʕamm(a)* and *ʕam* from *ʕammāl* 'working', which he describes as the active participle of the activity verb 'work'. Sellami (2022, pp. 564–565) specifies the source more exactly as a hyperbolic participle of the *faʕʕāl* pattern, and it is this characterisation that the present paper adopts. Either way, the source is an activity verb rather than a posture verb, a point borne out in Gaza City, where speakers of Palestinian Arabic mark ongoing situations with *ʕammāl* and its reduced form *ʕamm-*, alongside a structurally distinct posture-verb strategy with *ʔāʕid* 'sitting' (AbuAmsha, 2019).

Syrian sources document the full cline. Cowell (1964) described the Damascene progressive, and Adnan (2025), working on Iraqi and Syrian Arabic in the German diaspora, treats Syrian *ʕam* as a continuous or habitual marker derived from *ʕammāl* and placed before the imperfect verb. Klimiuk's (2025, p. 243) grammar of Hama, in central Syria, describes *ʕam*, with the "other forms ʕamma and ʕammāl", as preceding "a verb in the b- or y-imperfect, introducing the meaning of the present continuous tense", and *kān* followed by *ʕam* and the imperfect as the past continuous (p. 244). In a single Syrian dialect, then, the fuller and the reduced stages of the cline are attested side by side. Brustad's (2000, pp. 233–248) comparative study of Moroccan, Egyptian, Syrian and Kuwaiti Arabic aptly situates *ʕam* in a wider typology, showing that Syrian and Kuwaiti grammaticalise a dedicated progressive marker (*ʕam* and *gāʕid*, respectively), whereas Moroccan and Egyptian do not formally separate the progressive from general indicative marking. Her northern Syrian fieldwork also records a reduced progressive marker, transcribed *mma*, which she treats as a "regional variant" of *ʕam* and a presumable reflex of *ʕammāl* (pp. 216, 247), as in *halla' ṣāyrīn il-banāt mma yṭannšu* 'Nowadays girls have come to ignore [social pressure]' (p. 247).

In Tartus, the same sentence would run *halla? ṣāyrīn il-banāt mə-yṭannšu*, with the same marker in the same position and with the same progressive meaning.[4] Closer still to Tartus, Behnstedt's dialect atlas of Syria, based on fieldwork carried out between 1985 and 1994, records *ma-* as the areal form of the present marker in the coastal mountain region around the city (Behnstedt, 1997, Map 161), with *šū ma-taʕmol?* 'what are you doing?' amongst its variants (Behnstedt, 1997, Beiheft, p. 89). Most recently, De Blasio (2022, p. 190), in a preliminary study of the verbal system of Tartus, identifies the reduction of *ʕam-* to *m-* as a distinctive feature of the Alawite dialect of the city, one also found on the nearby island of Arwād (Procházka, 2013). Beyond Syria, the same prefix is recorded for the Alawite village dialects of Hatay (Arnold, 1998, p. 116) and for the Alawite dialects of Cilicia (Procházka, 2002, p. 113), a distribution taken up in Section 4.2.

Work on Urban Jordanian Arabic has refined the semantic picture. Alhailawani and Al-Raba'a (2024) argue that *ʕam* and *ʕammāl* are not semantically identical, assigning *ʕammāl* an inceptive reading, which marks the onset of an action, and *ʕam* an immediate reading, which marks an action in progress at reference time.

Elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking world, progressive markers more often descend from posture verbs. In Hijazi Arabic, a progressive marker has developed out of the active participle of the verb 'sit' (Alsubhi, 2024), and the same source is attested in the Maghreb: Moroccan dialects of Fes and of coastal towns can use the posture verbs *gāləs* 'sit' and *bārək* 'crouch' as progressive auxiliaries (Sellami, 2022, pp. 564, 576), while Tunisian Arabic has a preverbal postural marker, *qāʕid*, alongside a structurally distinct postverbal marker, *fī* (Saddour, 2009). In Qatari Arabic, *gāʕid* 'sitting' is an established progressive marker, distinct from the future and intentive prefix *b-*, with 57 corpus tokens showing consistent subject agreement (Kalach & Al-Hamad, 2023, pp. 213, 219–220). In Najdi Arabic, *qāʕid* is undergoing comparable desemanticisation, its acceptability as a progressive marker rising among younger speakers (Al Aloula, 2021, pp. ix, 4). The Najdi case bears mentioning, for it shows a posture-derived marker advancing from one generation to the next, an age-graded profile of exactly the kind the present study examines for an activity-derived one.

The form itself, then, is documented: its regional footprint was already visible on Behnstedt's maps, and De Blasio associates it with Alawite speech, though on the strength of general description rather than speaker-by-speaker data. How its use is distributed across a speech community, by place, faith, generation and gender, has yet to be described, and the present study sets out to model precisely that distribution.

1.5. Research Questions and Predictions

Three questions guide the investigation.

RQ1. How are *ʕam* and *ma-* distributed by geography and religion in Tartus? If *ma-* is rooted in the rural Alawite population, rural speakers should use it more than urban speakers, and Alawites more than non-Alawites. A distribution of this kind would confirm macro-level social stratification and show that the spread of the advanced variant is socially delimited from the outset.

RQ2. Among urban Alawites, the very group that carried *ma-* from the countryside into the city, is the variant being passed on to the next generation, or is it receding? If it is receding, older urban Alawites should use it more than younger ones, and women should lead the shift away from it if the urban norm carries prestige. Such an outcome would suggest that the urban environment, where *ʕam* is the norm, is overriding the intergenerational transmission of *ma-*.

RQ3. Does the cline diffuse freely across the speech community, or does its trajectory vary with social context? If social forces can constrain grammaticalisation, three outcomes are to be expected: stability in the rural Alawite heartland, generational decline in the city

and limited uptake amongst non-Alawites. Were this pattern to emerge, it would show that one and the same cline can culminate in markedly different outcomes, and that the fate of an internally emergent form may be decided by the social field through which it moves.

The three questions are answered from the synchronic data. The historical roots of the differentiation they bring to light are a further concern, and Section 4.2 takes them up on comparative evidence from the Alawite dialects of Hatay and Cilicia.

2. Methodology

2.1. Speaker Sample and Recruitment

A total of 144 native speakers of the Tartus dialect took part in the study: 54 urban Alawites, 68 rural Alawites, 14 urban non-Alawites, and 8 rural non-Alawites, comprising 81 men and 63 women, aged between 13 and 77 (Appendix A). Participants were recruited through the 'friend-of-a-friend' method, whereby trust between the researcher and the community is gradually scaffolded through pre-existing social ties, thereby easing participants' self-consciousness and creating conditions conducive to natural speech (Milroy & Gordon, 2003; Buchstaller & Khattab, 2013, p. 80). The pertinence of the approach lies in its capacity to blunt, in large measure, the well-known confound of the 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1966/2006, pp. 59, 86), whereby the very act of observation distorts the speech being observed. All participants were lifelong residents of their communities, either Tartus city or its surrounding villages, and had been raised in monolingual Arabic-speaking households. Ten participants were under 18 at the time of recording; for them, parental or guardian consent and the participant's own assent were obtained before the interview.

The non-Alawite samples are small: 14 urban speakers (12 Sunnis and 2 Christians) and 8 rural speakers, all of whom happened to be Christians (no rural Sunni speakers were recorded). Christians and Sunnis were therefore grouped under a single 'non-Alawite' category, and this limitation has been kept in view in interpreting the results.

2.2. Data Collection

Data were collected through sociolinguistic interviews conducted by the first author, a native of Tartus, following Labov's (1984) principles for eliciting casual speech. The recordings were made between the beginning of July and the end of September 2019, some eight years into the Syrian conflict. Tartus was not then a scene of fighting, but the war had brought displaced families from other governorates to the coast; since every participant was a lifelong resident of the city or its villages, such newcomers are not represented in the sample. The wartime setting bears more directly on the uvular [q], whose social loading in the same community is discussed in Section 4.4. The interview modules covered personal narratives, childhood memories, local traditions and opinions on social change, so as to encourage spontaneous speech. All tokens of the progressive marked by *ʕam* or *ma-* were then extracted from the recordings, yielding 590 tokens (between 1 and 13 per speaker, with a mean of Section 4.1).

The first author's local origin calls for a word on accommodation. An interviewer from the community may be received differently by speakers who do and do not share her background, and Alawite and non-Alawite participants might, in principle, have adjusted their speech towards or away from her in different degrees. Every interview was arranged through the participant's own network and conducted in the local dialect, so that she came to each speaker, Alawite or not, as a friend of a friend rather than as a stranger. Some accommodation cannot be ruled out all the same. Two observations suggest that it did not shape the present variable to any great extent. Accommodation acts most readily on salient features (Trudgill, 1986), and the progressive prefix attracts no overt comment anywhere in the recordings (Section 4.4). Most speakers, besides, used only one of the two

markers throughout their interview (Section 3.4), which is hard to reconcile with a gradual adjustment to the interviewer in the course of the conversation.

2.3. Defining and Coding the Variable

Because the quantitative analysis rests entirely on what was counted, the envelope of variation needs to be stated precisely. In keeping with the principle of accountability (Labov, 1972), it was defined semantically before it was defined formally. A token was included when an imperfect verb marked by *ʕam* or *ma-* carried a progressive reading, that is, when it presented a situation as ongoing at reference time, whether momentarily or over a longer current period. Past progressives, in which the marked verb follows *kān* 'was', were included on the same criterion. The reading of each token was established from its discourse context in the interview, and in cases of doubt it was settled in consultation with a colleague. Every included context, then, was one in which either marker could occur, and one and the same speaker could, and sometimes did, use both, as in (4), from an urban Alawite man aged 37:

(4) a. *ʕam* *t-waqqef-ni* *ʕan* *šeyl* *ktīr*
PROG 3SG.F-stop.IMPF-1SG from work much
'(These things) are stopping me from doing much work.' (speaker 14D: urban Alawite man, 37)

b. *ma-y-qūl-o* *hēk*
prog-3pl-say.impf thus
'They are saying that.' (speaker 14D)

Formally, the variable was defined by the marker alone. *ʕam* is a free particle placed before the imperfect verb; *ma-* is a bound prefix attached to it, realised as [ma] or, with a reduced vowel, as [mə]. Tokens were coded as *ʕam* or *ma-* irrespective of what followed the marker. In Syrian Arabic, *ʕam* may precede either the bare imperfect or the imperfect carrying the optional indicative prefix *b-* (Brustad, 2000, p. 234; Klimiuk, 2025, p. 243; for Tartus, De Blasio, 2022, p. 190), and both orders occur in the Tartus recordings, the second as in (5):

(5) *ʔana* *ʕam* *b-eṭlob* *sīviyyāt*
I PROG IND-1SG.ask_for.IMPF CVs
'I am asking for CVs.' (speaker 18D: urban Alawite woman, 24)

This second alternation is independent of the choice between the markers and was not analysed here. The prefix *ma-*, by contrast, is never followed by *b-* in the data, being itself bound to the imperfect verb. In (6), the prefix attaches directly to the first-person prefix *ʔ-*, leaving no room for *b-*. The restriction is not peculiar to Tartus: AlShihry (2017, p. 91) observes that "the dialects that have the shortened forms mma- and ma- and have b- at their disposal as an indicative marker do not accept the b-prefix after the progressive marker". Cowell (1964, p. 320) had already noted that the Lebanese forms *ʕan-*, *man-* and *ma-* "are never followed by *b-*".

(6) *ma-ʔ-ešteɣel* *maʕ-in*
PROG-1SG-work.IMPF with-3PL
'I am working with them.' (speaker 180: rural Alawite woman, 33)

Nor should the prefix be mistaken for the negator. In negated progressives, the negator precedes the prefixed verb, as *mū* does in (7), and the verbal negator *mā* is a free particle with a long vowel. Example (8) illustrates a past progressive with *kān*.

(7) *mū* *ma-y-rūḥ* *riyāḍa*
NEG PROG-3SG.M-go.IMPF sport
'He is not going (to do) sport.' (speaker 5D: rural Alawite man, 38)

(8) *kān* *ma-y-eḥki* *žadd* *waqt-a*
be.PST.3SG.M PROG-3SG.M-speak.IMPF seriously time-3SG.F
'He was speaking seriously at that time.' (speaker 19D: urban Alawite woman, 54)

The coding therefore rests on two decisions: a semantic one, whether the token carries a progressive reading, and a formal one, which marker it carries. No finer semantic subdivision, such as the inceptive and immediate readings that Alhailawani and Al-Raba'a (2024) separate for Jordanian, entered the coding, since the dependent variable is the choice of marker, with the progressive function held constant. Each included token contributed one binary observation (*ʕam* = 0, *ma-* = 1), and the speaker-level counts given in Appendix A are the input to every model reported below. The independent variables were coded as follows: Geography (urban = 0, rural = 1), Religion (non-Alawite = 0, Alawite = 1), Gender (female = 0, male = 1) and Age (continuous, in years).

2.4. Analytical Approach

The analysis proceeds through three main models and one comparison model, all of them mixed-effects logistic regressions with speaker as a random intercept. Model 1, at the macro level, was fitted to the full dataset (144 speakers, 590 tokens), with Geography, Religion, Age and Gender as fixed effects; it tests whether *ma-* is socially stratified by place and faith in Tartus as a whole. Whether the effect of geography differs between Alawites and non-Alawites was tested by adding a Geography × Religion interaction to Model 1 and comparing the two models by a likelihood-ratio test. Model 2 was fitted to the urban Alawites alone (54 speakers, 254 tokens), with Age and Gender as fixed effects, and asks whether *ma-* is being passed on in the city or receding. Model 3 was fitted to the rural Alawites alone (68 speakers, 216 tokens), with the same fixed effects, and asks whether *ma-* holds its ground in the rural heartland. Model 4 compares the two Alawite communities directly (122 speakers, 470 tokens), with Geography, Age, Gender and a Geography × Age interaction; the interaction tests whether *ma-* is receding faster in the city than in the villages.

Speaker enters every model as a random effect because each speaker contributed several tokens and most speakers (121 of 144) used only one of the two variants. A regression that treats every token as independent overstates the significance of between-speaker predictors (Johnson, 2009). In the present data it would, for instance, return a significant gender effect that disappears once the speaker is modelled. Age was centred on the mean of each sample. The models were fitted by maximum likelihood, with the speaker effect integrated out numerically, and each was compared with a model containing only the speaker effect by means of a likelihood-ratio test. Estimates are reported in log-odds. Because most speakers are near-categorical in their choice, the speaker variance is large, and so are the speaker-specific coefficients; odds ratios derived from them would be hard to read, and the percentages in the Section 3 are a better guide to the size of each difference.

Finally, an exploratory analysis of variant dominance classified each speaker as AM-dominant (more than 75% *ʕam*), MA-dominant (more than 75% *ma-*) or mixed. It shows whether group averages reflect probabilistic variation within speakers or categorical preferences between them.

3. Results

All tables and models reported below are computed from the speaker-level counts in Appendix A (144 speakers, 590 tokens).

3.1. Macro-Level Analysis (All Speakers, N = 144)

Table 1 presents the distribution of *ma-* by geography and religion in the full sample.

Table 1. Distribution of *ma-* by geography and religion.

Group	Speakers	*ma-* Tokens	All Tokens	% *ma-*
Urban non-Alawite	14	11	81	13.6
Urban Alawite	54	81	254	31.9
Rural non-Alawite	8	5	39	12.8
Rural Alawite	68	123	216	56.9
Total	144	220	590	37.3

Rural Alawites use *ma-* most (56.9% of their progressive tokens), followed by urban Alawites (31.9%). Non-Alawites use it at similarly low rates in the city (13.6%) and in the countryside (12.8%).

Table 2 reports Model 1, fitted to the full sample, which tests geography, religion, age and gender together as predictors of *ma-*.

Table 2. Mixed-effects logistic regression, Model 1 (all speakers; 144 speakers, 590 tokens).

Predictor	Estimate (β)	SE	95% CI	*p*
(Intercept)	−12.27	2.90	[−17.95, −6.59]	<0.001
Geography (rural)	5.29	1.50	[2.34, 8.23]	<0.001
Religion (Alawite)	8.18	2.35	[3.57, 12.78]	<0.001
Age (per year)	0.17	0.05	[0.07, 0.27]	<0.001
Gender (male)	2.20	1.24	[−0.22, 4.62]	0.075

Note: Dependent variable: *ma-* = 1, *ʕam* = 0. Random intercept for speaker, SD = 5.26. Age centred at 36.4 years. Likelihood-ratio test against the speaker-only model: $\chi^2(4) = 55.20$, $p < 0.001$.

Religion and geography both emerge as significant predictors. Alawite speakers use *ma-* far more than non-Alawites ($\beta = 8.18$, $p < 0.001$), and rural speakers more than urban ones ($\beta = 5.29$, $p < 0.001$); in raw terms, 43.4% of Alawite tokens are *ma-*, against 13.3% of non-Alawite tokens. Since the non-Alawite rates hardly differ between city and villages, the geographical effect appears to be carried largely by the Alawite community. The observation is descriptive. Adding a Geography × Religion interaction to Model 1 does not improve its fit ($\beta = 2.95$, SE = 3.74, $p = 0.429$; $\chi^2(1) = 0.64$, $p = 0.424$), which is hardly surprising with only eight rural non-Alawite speakers, and the interaction can be neither confirmed nor ruled out on the basis of the present data. Age is significant as well ($\beta = 0.17$ per year, $p < 0.001$): the older the speaker, the likelier the use of *ma-*. Gender does not reach significance ($\beta = 2.20$, $p = 0.075$). The large speaker variance (SD = 5.26) reflects the fact that most speakers use one variant almost exclusively (Section 3.4).

3.2. Intra-Urban Analysis (Urban Alawites, N = 54)

Table 3 sets out the urban Alawite figures by age and gender.

Older urban Alawites use *ma-* far more than younger ones: it accounts for 66.0% of progressive tokens among speakers over 50 and for 17.7% among those aged 18 to 30. Men use it more than women overall (44.7% against 21.4%), and none of the fifteen women aged 18 to 30 used it at all, although women and men aged 31 to 50 use it at similar rates (34.3% and 30.4%).

Table 4 reports Model 2, fitted to the urban Alawites alone, which tests the effects of age and gender on the use of *ma-* once geography and religion are held constant.

Table 3. Distribution of *ma-* by age and gender, urban Alawites (N = 54).

Age Group	Men	Women	Total
13 to 17	no speakers	20.0 (2/10; 1)	20.0 (2/10; 1)
18 to 30	43.5 (20/46; 11)	0.0 (0/67; 15)	17.7 (20/113; 26)
31 to 50	30.4 (14/46; 8)	34.3 (12/35; 7)	32.1 (26/81; 15)
51 and over	77.3 (17/22; 6)	57.1 (16/28; 6)	66.0 (33/50; 12)
Total	44.7 (51/114; 25)	21.4 (30/140; 29)	31.9 (81/254; 54)

Note: Cells give % *ma-* (*ma-* tokens/all tokens; number of speakers).

Table 4. Mixed-effects logistic regression, Model 2 (urban Alawites; 54 speakers, 254 tokens).

Predictor	Estimate (β)	SE	95% CI	*p*
(Intercept)	−5.06	1.94	[−8.86, −1.25]	0.009
Age (per year)	0.21	0.09	[0.04, 0.38]	0.014
Gender (male)	3.30	2.17	[−0.96, 7.56]	0.128

Note: Random intercept for speaker, SD = 5.67. Age centred at 36.6 years. Likelihood-ratio test against the speaker-only model: $\chi^2(2) = 13.99$, $p < 0.001$.

Age emerges as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.21$ per year, $p = 0.014$), consistent with an active generational decline of *ma-* in the city. Gender does not reach significance once individual speakers are taken into account ($\beta = 3.30$, $p = 0.128$). The gap between men and women in Table 3 is wide, but it rests on relatively few speakers. Women, and young women above all, use *ma-* least, which fits a shift away from the variant led by women; the present sample does not allow this to be confirmed statistically.

3.3. Intra-Rural Analysis (Rural Alawites, N = 68)

Age reaches significance ($\beta = 0.16$ per year, $p = 0.038$), whereas gender does not ($p = 0.235$). Older rural Alawites thus still use *ma-* somewhat more than younger ones: 66.7% at 31 to 50 and 61.3% over 50, against 49.0% at 18 to 30 and 56.5% at 13 to 17.[5] The contrast with the city is plain all the same. In the villages, *ma-* holds about half or more of the progressive tokens at every age, and it is the majority variant in three of the four age groups, the youngest included.

A direct comparison of the two Alawite communities (Model 4; 122 speakers, 470 tokens) shows the gap between village and city at its widest amongst the young. Among speakers aged 18 to 30, *ma-* accounts for 49.0% of rural but only 17.7% of urban tokens, whereas speakers over 50 in the two communities hardly differ (61.3% and 66.0%). Geography ($\beta = 5.85$, $p < 0.001$) and age ($\beta = 0.21$, $p = 0.005$) are significant in this model, and gender again falls short ($\beta = 2.61$, $p = 0.056$). The Geography × Age interaction, however, is not significant ($\beta = -0.04$, $p = 0.627$), so the faster decline in the city remains a descriptive tendency rather than a statistically confirmed difference.

Table 5 sets out the distribution of ma- by age and gender among the rural Alawites, the rural counterpart of the urban figures in Table 3.

Table 5. Distribution of *ma-* by age and gender, rural Alawites (N = 68).

Age Group	Men	Women	Total
13 to 17	33.3 (3/9; 5)	71.4 (10/14; 3)	56.5 (13/23; 8)
18 to 30	57.7 (30/52; 15)	38.6 (17/44; 13)	49.0 (47/96; 28)
31 to 50	77.8 (28/36; 15)	53.3 (16/30; 7)	66.7 (44/66; 22)
51 and over	64.7 (11/17; 6)	57.1 (8/14; 4)	61.3 (19/31; 10)
Total	63.2 (72/114; 41)	50.0 (51/102; 27)	56.9 (123/216; 68)

Note: Cells give % *ma-* (*ma-* tokens/all tokens; number of speakers).

Table 6 reports Model 3, fitted to the rural Alawites alone, which tests the same two predictors, age and gender, in the community that uses *ma-* most.

Table 6. Mixed-effects logistic regression, Model 3 (rural Alawites; 68 speakers, 216 tokens).

Predictor	Estimate (β)	SE	95% CI	*p*
(Intercept)	1.03	1.27	[−1.46, 3.51]	0.418
Age (per year)	0.16	0.08	[0.01, 0.31]	0.038
Gender (male)	2.06	1.73	[−1.34, 5.46]	0.235

Note: Random intercept for speaker, SD = 5.21. Age centred at 34.3 years. Likelihood-ratio test against the speaker-only model: $\chi^2(2) = 9.16$, $p = 0.010$.

3.4. Variant Dominance

To see whether group averages reflect uniform probabilistic variation or categorical preferences, each speaker was classified by his or her individual usage, as analysed in Table 7.

Table 7. Variant dominance by speaker.

Group	Speakers	AM-Dominant (>75% *ʕam*)	Mixed	MA-Dominant (>75% *ma-*)
Urban non-Alawite	14	12 (85.7%)	2 (14.3%)	0 (0.0%)
Urban Alawite	54	35 (64.8%)	5 (9.3%)	14 (25.9%)
Rural non-Alawite	8	7 (87.5%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (12.5%)
Rural Alawite	68	21 (30.9%)	6 (8.8%)	41 (60.3%)
Total	144	75 (52.1%)	13 (9.0%)	56 (38.9%)

Rural Alawites show by far the largest share of MA-dominant speakers (60.3%), against 25.9% of urban Alawites and between 0 and 12.5% of non-Alawites. In every group, moreover, most speakers lean heavily towards one variant. In all, 121 of the 144 speakers used only one, and so did 42 of the 64 speakers who produced five or more tokens, so the pattern cannot be put down to small per-speaker samples alone. The 56.9% average among rural Alawites is thus the sum of a majority who use *ma-* almost exclusively and a minority who use *ʕam*, and the choice between the markers appears to be made largely speaker by speaker. Such a profile is what one would expect of a variant functioning as a community marker, and the marker is strongest in the rural Alawite heartland.

4. Discussion

The investigation set out to test whether a grammaticalisation cline can be socially embedded, and the evidence suggests that it can. The progressive *ma-* does not diffuse freely through the Tartus speech community. Its distribution is constrained by religion, place, and generation, and its trajectory differs from one social group to another. In Croft's (2000) terms, the innovation is not in question: *ma-* exists, it is fully available as a form and it is used at every age in the villages. Its propagation is another matter. We read the Tartus case as evidence that social forces do more than modulate the rate of grammaticalisation; in particular sections of a community, they can halt the spread of a cline's most advanced stage or reverse its fortunes.

4.1. One Cline, Three Outcomes

The most striking result is that a single cline, with *ʕammāl*, *ʕam* and *ma-* as its points, yields three distinct outcomes depending on where one looks. The variation is anything but random. It follows the demographic and social history of Tartus.

Among rural Alawites, *ma-* is maintained. It accounts for 56.9% of their progressive tokens and for about half or more in every age group, from 49.0% among speakers aged 18 to 30 to 66.7% among those aged 31 to 50, and gender has no significant effect. Older speakers still use it somewhat more than younger ones ($p = 0.038$), so the rural pattern is best described as maintenance at a high level, with at most a slow recession, rather than as complete stability. Some 60.3% of rural Alawites use *ma-* almost exclusively, a sign that the variant functions as an entrenched community norm. Example (9), from a 25-year-old villager who used *ma-* in all seven of his progressive tokens, is characteristic:

(9) *ma-y-ešteɣyel* *b-es-sūq*
PROG-3SG.M-work.IMPF in-DEF-market
'He is working in the market.' (speaker 98: rural Alawite man, 25)

Here the cline has reached its most advanced stage and largely holds it. Several conditions plausibly account for this. Those who remained in the rural heartland have had less sustained contact with urban *ʕam* speakers than those who moved to the city, and village networks remain dense and locally oriented; such conditions are likely to have preserved the advanced form. The pattern accords with Nevalainen and Palander-Collin's (2011) observation that grammaticalisation processes can follow different social trajectories depending on community structure. In rural Tartus, that structure has favoured maintenance.

In the city, by contrast, *ma-* is receding among younger speakers. Among urban Alawites, the very group that carried the variant from the countryside in the migrations that began in the 1960s, age is a significant predictor, and gender shows a clear but non-significant trend. The prefix accounts for 66.0% of progressive tokens among urban Alawites over 50 and for only 17.7% among those aged 18 to 30 ($\beta = 0.21$ per year, $p = 0.014$), a classic apparent-time pattern suggestive of generational change. Men use *ma-* more than women (44.7% against 21.4% of tokens), though the difference is not significant once individual speakers are taken into account ($p = 0.128$). The recession is most visible amongst young women: not one of the fifteen women aged 18 to 30 used *ma-*. They have, as it were, voted with their tongues. Labov (1990, p. 213) observes that in change from above, "women favor the incoming prestige form more than men" and "lead in both the acquisition of new prestige patterns and the elimination of stigmatized forms", and he notes that the principle holds in Arabic-speaking cities too, once the prestige norm is taken to be the modern urban vernacular rather than Classical Arabic (Labov, 1990, pp. 212–213). In Tartus, *ʕam* is at once the urban norm and the supra-local Damascene form, and young urban women appear to be abandoning the rural *ma-* accordingly, although the gender effect does not reach significance in Model 2, and the pattern is best read as a tendency. The same gendered pattern has been documented for Qaf in Tartus: in the city, women use the urban [ʔ] significantly more than men, whereas in the villages, gender has no significant effect, and both sexes favour [q] (Mohamad, 2023a). Example (10), from a 24-year-old urban Alawite woman who produced only *ʕam* in her interview, is typical of this younger group:

(10) *hiyye* *ʕam* *t-entož* *mustaḥḍarāt* *tažmīl*
she PROG 3SG.F-produce.IMPF preparations beautification
'(The company I am working at now,) it is producing cosmetics.' (speaker 18D: urban Alawite woman, 24)

The urban environment, dominated by *ʕam* speakers and by a supra-local Damascene norm carried through media and education (Hachimi, 2013), would thus appear to be curbing the transmission of *ma-* to younger generations. The fortunes of two coexisting layers are being reversed by social means, while the direction of grammaticalisation itself stays intact, since *ma-* shows no sign of reverting to a freer form. In apparent time, the

more advanced layer is losing ground to the less advanced one (Model 2). Why it does so the models cannot say directly. On the distributional evidence set out in Section 4.3, the social meaning attached to *ʕam* as the urban and supra-local variant is the likeliest reason; the part played by gender in the shift remains a non-significant trend, conspicuous in the young women's avoidance of *ma-* but not confirmed once individual speakers are taken into account.

The third outcome concerns the non-Alawite communities, whose use of *ma-* stays close to the urban level even in the countryside. Urban non-Alawites, Sunnis and Christians, use *ma-* in 13.6% of their progressive tokens, and rural non-Alawites, all of them Christians in this sample, in 12.8%, despite living in the countryside. Only 5 of the 22 non-Alawite speakers used *ma-* at all, and only one of them is MA-dominant. Geography alone cannot account for this. Rural non-Alawites align with the urban *ʕam* norm rather than with the rural Alawite *ma-* norm, which suggests some distancing from a feature associated with the rural Alawite majority. Comparable patterns of avoidance have been documented wherever a feature comes to be associated with a particular religious or sectarian group (Holes, 1983, pp. 446–447, 452; Al-Wer et al., 2015; Germanos & Miller, 2015, p. 95). In Bahrain, for instance, Sunni speakers in Holes's data never produced the variants marked as Shiʕi, while literate Shiʕi speakers avoided the forms stereotypically associated with their own community (Holes, 1983, pp. 446–447). As Germanos and Miller (2015, p. 96) caution, however, religious affiliation in Arabic-speaking communities "is always linked with other social factors", which in Tartus include place of residence and migration history. The rural non-Alawite subgroup is, moreover, too small (N = 8) for confident generalisation, and we treat the pattern as suggestive rather than definitive.

Examples (11) and (12) illustrate both sides of the picture. The urban Sunni woman in (11) uses *ʕam*, as most non-Alawite speakers do. Yet *ma-* is not absent outside the Alawite community, as (12), from a 64-year-old urban Christian man, shows, although such speakers are few.

(11)

ʕam	*n-eḥḍar*	*tilfizyōn*	*w-mā-fī*	*šī*	*žd̄īd*
PROG	1PL-watch.IMPF	television	and-NEG-EXIST	thing	new

'We are watching TV, and there is nothing new.' (speaker 35D: urban Sunni woman, 52)

(12)

l-libnāniyye	*kell-in*	*ma-y-ež-o*	*y-āxd-o*		
DEF-Lebanese	all-3PL	prog-3pl-come.impf	3pl-take.impf		
men	*hōn*	*laʔenno*	*ʔarxaṣ*	*men*	*ʕend-in*
from	here	because	cheaper	than	at-3PL

'All the Lebanese are coming to take (medicine) from here, because it is cheaper than in their country.' (speaker 1D: urban Christian man, 64)

These three outcomes, maintenance at a high level in the rural heartland, a steep generational decline in the city that is most visible among young women, and restricted diffusion among non-Alawites, show that the trajectory of a grammaticalising form is not settled by internal pressures alone. Social context decides whether an advanced form spreads, holds or recedes.

4.2. Historical Roots of the ʕam/ma- Differentiation

The distribution reported here has roots that reach back well before the migrations of the twentieth century. Both markers are standardly traced to *ʕammāl*, but they belong to different dialect areas. The prefix *ma-* is the form of the coastal mountain dialects (Behnstedt, 1997, Map 161) and is also reported for parts of Lebanon (Cowell, 1964, p. 320), whereas *ʕam* is the urban form of the Levant (AlShihry, 2017, p. 92). Sellami (2022, p. 569) places

the rise of the *ʕammāl* progressive after the older Levantine progressive *b-*, attested in a fourteenth-century Syrian text, had generalised into an indicative marker.

Nor is the reduced mountain form a recent development. The Alawite communities of Cilicia, whose ancestors emigrated from Syria in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many of them from the Latakia area and the Syrian mountains (Procházka-Eisl & Procházka, 2018, pp. 312–313, 319), mark the progressive present with a prefix *ma-* (Procházka, 2002, p. 113; 2007, p. 128). Procházka (2002, p. 113) derives this prefix from *ʕammāl* and reports it in the same function for the Alawite village dialects of Antioch, for western Syria and for northern Lebanon. Its presence in communities separated from the Syrian mountains for some two centuries makes it likely that the prefix was already part of mountain speech before that emigration. In Hatay, moreover, the forms are distributed much as in Tartus. Almost all Alawite villages have *ma-*, the Alawites of the city of Antakya have *ʕam-*, and Sunnis and Christians mostly use forms that go back to *ʕammāl* together with the *b-* imperfect (Arnold, 1998, pp. 116–117). The parallel is remarkable, for it repeats, some 150 kilometres to the north and across a state border, the very configuration of village, city and confessional out-group that the Tartus data display. The home of the prefix was the kind of small, tightly knit, low-contact community in which, as Trudgill (2011, Ch. 5) suggests, grammaticalisation through phonological reduction is most likely, and which high-contact koinés resist.

What our models register as a religious contrast is thus, historically, a contrast between two settlement zones. Germanos and Miller (2015, pp. 92–93) describe the same process for the Arabic-speaking world at large: migration turns geographical variants into social ones, a process Trudgill (2004, pp. 87–88) terms reallocation. In Tartus, the migrations after 1963 (Balanche, 2006) did exactly this. That the urban form is prevailing agrees with Miller's (2003, p. 259) observation that migration has reshaped urban vernaculars less radically where the hinterland is rural and sedentary. Should the account hold, the Tartus case shows two processes of dialect differentiation working in sequence. Areal divergence, under the low-contact conditions of the mountains, produced the reduced prefix. Reallocation, under the high-contact conditions of the city, then turned the areal contrast into a social one, and is now thinning the prefix out amongst the city's young. No historical records of these dialects exist, and the account is offered as a reconstruction from comparative evidence.

4.3. Why ʕam Prevails in the City

What, then, explains the decline of *ma-* in the city and its limited uptake beyond the Alawite community? The distribution of *ʕam* itself points to the answer. Across all groups, *ʕam* is the more frequent variant, used in 62.7% of all progressive tokens. Its share is highest among non-Alawites (86.7%), in the city (72.5%), among urban Alawite women (78.6%) and among younger urban Alawites (82.3% at ages 18 to 30, and every token produced by the young women of this group). This is the familiar Labovian signature of a socially preferred norm, whereby younger speakers lead the shift, women move in the same direction as a non-significant trend, and out-group members fall into line. That non-Alawites, who have no historical connection with *ma-*, use *ʕam* at such high rates further substantiates its standing as the urban standard.

Where does this prestige come from? Several factors converge. The Damascene dialect, in which *ʕam* is the standard progressive marker, functions as a supra-local norm throughout Syria, and speakers all over the country meet it daily on television, radio and social media and in schooling (Hachimi, 2013). More generally, *ʕam* is described as the urban form of the Levant, in contrast to the "less urban" *qēʕəd* (AlShihry, 2017, p. 92). A comparable dynamic is reported for Khawētna in eastern Syria, where Talay (1999, p. 182) records that the locally rooted progressive marker *qēʕəd* coexists with *ʕam*, a form he identifies as borrowed from the

koine; AlShihry (2017, pp. 187–188) reads this coexistence as convergence towards the more prestigious urban marker, with the rural form retained in non-convergent contexts.[6] Within Tartus itself, the city centre was historically dominated by Sunni and Christian communities who use *ʕam*, and the norm they established persisted even after Alawites became the majority of the city's population (Balanche, 2015). In the first author's observation, *ʕam* is also the form favoured in formal settings, in inter-group communication and by speakers with higher education, all of them contexts associated with prestige; this impression awaits systematic confirmation.

In the absence of direct attitudinal data, these distributional patterns suggest strongly that *ʕam* functions as the socially preferred standard in Tartus. A plausible scenario runs as follows. Rural migrants bringing *ma-* into the city would have met this norm at once. Their children, exposed to *ʕam* in schools, mixed neighbourhoods and peer groups, would have acquired both variants, while their grandchildren, and especially the young women among them, attuned to prestige norms and engaged with supra-local networks of education, employment and media, have shifted decisively towards *ʕam*. The data are cross-sectional and do not trace families, so the three-generation account remains a reconstruction. If it holds, the cline is socially embedded rather than frozen. Much as two coins of equal face value may circulate side by side while the market quietly comes to prefer one of them, *ʕam* and *ma-* buy exactly the same progressive reading, yet the urban market has come to set a higher price on *ʕam*. The most grammaticalised form is losing to a less grammaticalised one, plausibly because of the social premium attached to the urban norm.

A parallel pattern was documented by Habib (2010) in Hims, where rural Christian migrants shifted towards the urban [ʔ] in mixed neighbourhoods but kept [q] in Alawite-dominated ones. Much the same mechanism may be at work in Tartus, with the density of contact with urban *ʕam* speakers governing the pace of the shift. If so, *ma-* should survive longer in Alawite-majority neighbourhoods and recede faster in mixed ones; neighbourhood was not included as a predictor in the present analysis, and the expectation remains to be tested. Another Levantine city offers a grammatical parallel. In the newly formed dialect of Amman, contact between Jordanian and Palestinian input varieties has reshaped competing grammatical variants, such as the second-person plural suffix (Jordanian *-ku* and Palestinian *-kon* converging on *-kum*) and third-person imperfect verb morphology, into new and stable community norms (Al-Wer, 2020, pp. 560–561). The parallel matters precisely because the Tartus variable, unlike Qaf, is morphosyntactic.

4.4. Where Does ma- Stand on the Indexical Ladder?

The social embedding of *ma-* can be read through Silverstein's (2003) orders of indexicality, which distinguish statistical correlations that analysts can detect (first order) from socially recognised meanings that speakers themselves orient to, comment on or manipulate (second and higher orders).

The variant correlates with geography, religion and age, with rural speakers, Alawites and older speakers using it more than their counterparts, and men showing a non-significant tendency in the same direction. Such patterns are systematic and measurable, and they place *ma-* at first-order indexicality, where the variant is associated with particular social groups in the structure of the data.

Of higher-order indexicality, the recordings show no trace. No speaker mentions *ma-*, no metalinguistic commentary surfaces and no one reports switching away from it in particular settings. The silence is telling when set beside the uvular [q] in the same community. Earlier research on Tartus documented extensive speaker commentary about [q]: speakers ridicule [q] users and report being pressed to soften it in Damascus (Mohamad, 2023b, pp. 13–17). By all indications, [q] has reached third-order indexicality, having

been enregistered, ideologised and made available for conscious manipulation. Nothing comparable surfaces for *ma-*.

The first author, a native of Tartus, has observed in informal daily interaction outside the recorded sample that younger urban Alawites, particularly women, avoid *ma-* in favour of *ʕam*. Whether this reflects a conscious evaluation of *ma-* or an unconscious accommodation to the urban norm cannot be decided from that impression, which awaits systematic investigation.

On the recorded evidence, then, *ma-* sits at first-order indexicality. The interviews offer no sign that speakers attach social meaning to it, and certainly none of the ideological loading that [q] has acquired. Production data alone cannot establish whether speakers notice and evaluate the variant, or whether any such awareness contributes to its urban decline. They do show that young urban Alawite women aged 18 to 30, who meet the urban and supra-local *ʕam* in schools, mixed neighbourhoods, media and workplaces, use *ʕam* exclusively. Whether *ma-* stays at first order or follows [q] towards higher orders will depend on social and political developments to come, and on whether the variant becomes an object of overt commentary, as [q] has. Eckert (2012, p. 94) describes, with characteristic economy, how such a shift can begin: a distinguishing feature of a salient population's speech "may attract attention" and, once recognised, "can be extracted from its linguistic surroundings and come, on its own, to index membership in that population". For now, *ma-* is statistically correlated with its users but not yet ideologised.

4.5. Implications for Grammaticalisation Theory

The results sit uneasily with a common expectation in grammaticalisation research, namely, that the more grammaticalised form, once it has emerged, will gain ground at the expense of its less grammaticalised competitor. Traugott (2011, p. 29) describes the standard schema A > B/A (>B) as a shorthand "for the development of B in variation with A as a result of reanalysis, and for the possible subsequent loss of A". The same expectation surfaces in Arabic linguistics. Discussing the future markers of Standard Arabic, Abdel-Hafiz (2005, p. 74) reasons that *sa-*, "which is more grammaticalized than its cognate sawfa, must be the newer form and is probably going to outlive the source form". Quantitative work cautions that even when a new form rises, "saturation routinely occurs before complete replacement" (Feltgen, 2025, p. 235). The city of Tartus goes a step further. There the less reduced form survives and, amongst the young, gains ground: *ma-* is retreating and *ʕam* advancing.

The reversal is no failure of grammaticalisation as a linguistic process. The cline from *ʕammāl* to *ma-* exists as a linguistic possibility, and the reduced prefix remains available to every speaker. Grammaticalisation pathways are simply not autonomous; they unfold inside social structures that can halt the spread of a cline's most advanced stage or reverse its fortunes. Croft's (2000) separation of innovation from propagation captures the point, for the Tartus cline is complete as an innovation while its propagation is socially selective. Arabic dialectology has already linked progressive variants to contact and social setting, as with the koine-borrowed *ʕam* alongside the local *qēʕəd* in Khawētna (Talay, 1999, p. 182; AlShihry, 2017, pp. 187–188). To our knowledge, however, the present study is the first to show, within a single Arabic dialect, one grammaticalisation cline producing different outcomes (maintenance, decline and restricted diffusion) in different social groups at the same time.

Socially conditioned grammaticalisation is not without precedent outside Arabic. Poplack and Tagliamonte (1999) show that diaspora varieties of African American English retain conservative constraints on the grammaticisation of *going to* as a future marker while mainstream varieties innovate, so that isolated, socially distinct communities occupy different positions on the same cline. Isolation, it would seem, does not push in one direction

only. Low-contact communities may preserve what mainstream varieties lose, as in that case, or carry a reduction further than high-contact varieties do, as in the Syrian coastal mountains (Section 4.2; Trudgill, 2011, Chs. 1 and 5); in both, their position on the cline departs from that of the mainstream. Cheshire (2013) documents the emergence of a new first-person pronoun, *man*, in multi-ethnic adolescent peer groups in inner-city London; frequency data she reports show it used almost four times as often in multi-ethnic Hackney as in a largely monolingual outer-London borough (Kerswill, 2014, as cited in Cheshire, 2013, p. 619). Laitinen (2008) shows that two grammaticalising indefinite pronouns of Early and Late Modern English followed different social paths: anaphoric *they* varied with writers' gender and later drew the attention of normative grammarians, whereas cataphoric *those* spread largely independently of social variables. Buchstaller (2014) argues, with some force, that the attitudes and ideologies attached to innovative quotatives are "of crucial importance for our understanding of the emergence and promotion of innovative forms" (p. 3), and she traces resistance to one such form to "the stereotyped ideologies that are attached to its use and typical users" (p. 91). The Tartus case adds to this record a single cline, in a single dialect, yielding maintenance, decline and restricted diffusion simultaneously in different social subgroups.

Nevalainen and Palander-Collin (2011) argue that grammaticalisation processes can be described with the same sociolinguistic frameworks as other types of change, and the Tartus case bears the proposition out directly: *ma-* behaves like any other sociolinguistic variable, stratified by geography, religion and age. It also bears on the cross-linguistic picture drawn by Mansfield (2025), in whose sample variables involving grammaticalisation "are not reported to induce meta-linguistic awareness" (p. 9) and tend to develop without social signalling. The *ʕam*/*ma-* alternation is at once a grammaticalisation cline and a variation between two forms of one marker, and it patterns with his grammatical form variables, which "tend to have social category correlations" (p. 10). A grammaticalising change, it would seem, can become socially loaded once its stages survive side by side.

These strands of evidence argue for an integrated model in which internal processes generate the cline and social processes decide its outcome. A theory of morphosyntactic change that aims at completeness will have to join universal clines to local social hierarchies, demographic histories and community identities.

The historical evidence of Section 4.2 sharpens this model in one respect. Layering is ordinarily pictured as the coexistence, within one variety, of forms that arose there one after the other (Hopper, 1991, p. 22). In Tartus the two layers are better described as areal products brought into contact, one carried to the city by migrants from the mountains and the other already established there. Layering here is the synchronic residue of dialect differentiation, and the social meanings the layers acquire derive from the communities that brought them. A grammaticalisation cline observed in a city may thus have been assembled from more than one place, and its stages may index places before they come to index social groups. This, in our view, is the principal theoretical contribution of the Tartus case: the outcome of a cline is decided by the social field through which it moves, and the shape of that field is itself a product of dialect history.

4.6. Situating the Tartus Pattern

The Tartus pattern departs from the two dominant accounts of progressive variation in Arabic. Ouali (2022) documented the grammaticalisation of *ʕammāl* to *ʕam* as a recurrent syntactic pathway, with variation conditioned internally, and Alhailawani and Al-Raba'a (2024), working on Urban Jordanian Arabic, showed that *ʕammāl* and *ʕam* have undergone a functional split, specialising in inceptive and immediate aspect respectively. Both accounts are internally motivated, and neither treats social stratification as a constraint on the cline.

In Tartus, by contrast, the choice between *ʕam* and *ma-* does not appear to be primarily semantic or phonological. It is socially patterned, at least in the city, where the variant that survives and spreads is the one carrying urban and supra-local prestige, which is not the most grammaticalised one. The cline itself stands; its outcome is socially mediated.

Sellami's (2022) typology classifies the progressive constructions of Arabic dialects by degree of grammaticalisation. The present analysis complements that perspective by showing that, even in one dialect, the same cline can produce different outcomes in different social contexts. A classification by degree of grammaticalisation therefore needs to be paired with knowledge of the social conditions under which each degree is sustained or lost.

4.7. Limitations

Three limitations need to be acknowledged. First, the non-Alawite samples are small (14 urban and 8 rural speakers), so readings of this group's behaviour in terms of socio-symbolic distancing remain suggestive. The number of tokens per speaker is also modest (1 to 13, with a mean of Section 4.1), which is one reason why speaker was modelled as a random effect.

Second, without attitudinal data the claim that *ʕam* is socially preferred remains inferential, grounded in distributional patterns rather than in speakers' own evaluations. Recent matched-guise work on Saudi Arabic shows how dialectal variables can attract social evaluation, regional association and even bias in hiring, which points to the need for perception-based follow-up work in Tartus (Al Alaslaa, 2025). As Kranich (2010, p. 254) concedes in her study of the English progressive, "subjective decisions can, of course, be less fully excluded than if formal properties such as subject type and clause type are taken as guides"; she nevertheless finds systematic distributional patterns a reliable basis for classification. In the same way, the stratified distribution of *ma-* and its correlation with geography, religion and age stand as empirical evidence of its social embedding, independently of overt attitudinal data. A matched-guise experiment (Campbell-Kibler, 2007) would be the natural next step towards testing whether listeners associate *ma-* and *ʕam* with social attributes.

Third, the binary urban/rural distinction obscures internal variation in village size, distance from the city and network density, and several social factors that may bear on the choice were not tested as predictors, namely, education, social class and neighbourhood of residence in the city. Some part of the effects reported here for religion, place and age may therefore reflect these untested factors. Nor did the analysis include linguistic predictors such as verb type, grammatical person or clause type, which may also condition the choice between the markers. The absence of metalinguistic commentary on *ma-* in the recordings, finally, does not prove that speakers never notice the variant.

5. Conclusions

This study offers the first quantitative sociolinguistic analysis of the progressive *ma-* in the Tartus dialect of Syrian Arabic. Drawing on 590 tokens from 144 speakers, it modelled the choice between *ʕam* and *ma-* with three mixed-effects logistic regressions, with speaker as a random effect and a fourth model comparing the two Alawite communities directly, in order to test whether a grammaticalisation cline can be socially embedded.

The results are, on the whole, clear. Religion, geography and age predict *ma-* use, with Alawite, rural and older speakers favouring it. Within the urban Alawite community, *ma-* is in steep generational recession: speakers over 50 use it in two of every three progressive tokens, speakers aged 18 to 30 in fewer than one in five, and women aged 18 to 30 not at all, although the overall gender difference is not significant. Among rural Alawites, *ma-* still accounts for about half or more of the progressive tokens at every age, even if older

speakers use it somewhat more. Non-Alawites, in city and villages alike, overwhelmingly favour the urban norm *ʕam*.

One and the same cline, then, culminates in different outcomes in different social contexts. The comparative evidence from Hatay and Cilicia suggests why: the contrast between *ʕam* and *ma-* continues an older one between the urban and the mountain dialects, which migration into Tartus reallocated to social groups. The result unsettles purely internal accounts of grammaticalisation and argues for an integrated model in which social forces influence more than the rate of change; they decide how far, and amongst whom, a cline's most advanced stage spreads. The implications extend beyond Arabic. Grammaticalisation pathways unfold in social structures that shape their outcomes, and social boundaries can confine a pathway, rendering synchronic variation a direct reflection of social history. In Tartus, syntax provides the cline, but society decides its fate.

Future work could proceed along four lines: perception experiments testing whether listeners associate the two markers with social attributes and whether *ma-* is beginning to move beyond first-order indexicality; models that add linguistic predictors and neighbourhood to the social ones; comparative fieldwork in the coastal mountains and in Hatay, which could put the historical account of Section 4.2 to the test; and a closer look at the marginal forms *ʕamma* and *qāʕid*, whose place in the Tartus system the present data leave undetermined. The present study can serve as a stepping stone for such endeavours.

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Informed Consent Statement: Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. For the ten participants under 18 years of age, parental or guardian consent was obtained together with the participant's own assent. All data were anonymised at the point of collection.

Data Availability Statement: The speaker-level token counts on which all analyses are based are provided in Appendix A.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: 1 first person; 3 third person; DEF definite; EXIST existential; F feminine; IMPF imperfect; IND indicative; M masculine; NEG negation; PL plural; PROG progressive; PST past; SG singular.

Appendix A. Speaker-Level Data (N = 144)

Age, gender, religion, geography and token counts for ʕam (AM) and ma- (MA) for all 144 speakers. Speaker numbers are those used for the examples in the text.

Seq	No.	Age	Gender	Religion	Geography	AM	MA	Total
1	6	53	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	4	4
2	24	38	Male	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
3	25	42	Male	Alawite	Rural	5	3	8
4	26	43	Male	Sunni	Urban	5	0	5
5	29	49	Male	Christian	Rural	7	0	7
6	30	29	Female	Alawite	Urban	1	0	1
7	35	52	Female	Sunni	Urban	6	0	6
8	37	14	Female	Alawite	Urban	8	2	10
9	75	22	Female	Alawite	Urban	1	0	1
10	76	21	Female	Christian	Rural	6	0	6
11	77	20	Female	Christian	Rural	5	0	5
12	78	13	Male	Alawite	Rural	3	0	3
13	79	17	Male	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
14	80	22	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	6	6
15	81	22	Male	Alawite	Urban	4	0	4
16	82	20	Male	Alawite	Rural	1	5	6
17	83	14	Male	Sunni	Urban	6	0	6
18	84	22	Female	Sunni	Urban	5	0	5
19	85	23	Male	Alawite	Rural	6	2	8
20	87	23	Female	Alawite	Urban	6	0	6
21	88	54	Male	Alawite	Rural	6	1	7
22	89	23	Female	Alawite	Urban	7	0	7
23	90	24	Male	Alawite	Rural	5	0	5
24	91	30	Female	Alawite	Urban	4	0	4
25	92	20	Male	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
26	93	27	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
27	94	27	Female	Alawite	Rural	6	0	6
28	95	32	Female	Alawite	Rural	4	2	6
29	96	60	Female	Alawite	Rural	6	0	6
30	97	27	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
31	98	25	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	7	7
32	100	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	5	5
33	101	20	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	4	4
34	102	33	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	5	5
35	103	26	Male	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
36	104	27	Female	Alawite	Rural	6	0	6
37	105	46	Female	Alawite	Urban	4	0	4
38	106	38	Female	Alawite	Urban	0	6	6
39	107	38	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
40	108	35	Female	Alawite	Rural	6	3	9
41	109	29	Female	Alawite	Rural	8	2	10
42	110	33	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
43	111	48	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
44	112	16	Male	Alawite	Rural	2	0	2
45	113	45	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
46	114	35	Female	Alawite	Urban	1	0	1
47	115	29	Female	Alawite	Urban	6	0	6
48	116	28	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
49	117	22	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
50	118	20	Female	Alawite	Urban	2	0	2
51	120	48	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5

Seq	No.	Age	Gender	Religion	Geography	AM	MA	Total
52	121	24	Female	Alawite	Urban	6	0	6
53	122	22	Male	Alawite	Rural	5	0	5
54	123	67	Male	Alawite	Urban	3	5	8
55	124	30	Female	Christian	Rural	0	4	4
56	129	47	Male	Alawite	Urban	1	0	1
57	130	22	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
58	131	26	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
59	133	22	Female	Alawite	Rural	3	0	3
60	136	44	Female	Alawite	Rural	3	0	3
61	138	51	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
62	140	51	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
63	141	26	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	5	5
64	143	15	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
65	145	13	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
66	146	13	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
67	148	47	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
68	149	17	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
69	150	22	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
70	151	50	Female	Alawite	Urban	6	2	8
71	152	55	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
72	153	27	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	6	6
73	154	47	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
74	155	24	Male	Christian	Urban	6	0	6
75	156	59	Male	Alawite	Urban	2	0	2
76	157	42	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
77	159	28	Male	Sunni	Urban	2	0	2
78	160	42	Male	Alawite	Urban	2	0	2
79	161	30	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
80	162	22	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
81	163	34	Male	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
82	164	35	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
83	165	75	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	2	2
84	167	67	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
85	168	20	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
86	169	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
87	170	43	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
88	171	19	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	1	2
89	173	44	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
90	174	73	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
91	175	69	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
92	176	18	Male	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
93	177	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	2	0	2
94	178	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
95	179	75	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	4	4
96	180	33	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	6	7
97	181	40	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	2	2
98	182	48	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
99	183	47	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
100	184	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
101	185	33	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
102	186	67	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
103	189	28	Female	Alawite	Rural	1	0	1
104	190	27	Male	Alawite	Urban	3	0	3
105	191	54	Male	Christian	Rural	1	0	1
106	192	30	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
107	193	38	Male	Alawite	Rural	2	0	2

Seq	No.	Age	Gender	Religion	Geography	AM	MA	Total
108	194	18	Male	Alawite	Urban	1	0	1
109	195	29	Male	Alawite	Urban	2	0	2
110	196	55	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	2	2
111	197	27	Male	Alawite	Rural	2	0	2
112	198	27	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	3	3
113	1D	64	Male	Christian	Urban	3	7	10
114	2D	77	Male	Christian	Rural	5	1	6
115	3D	55	Female	Alawite	Urban	1	4	5
116	4D	22	Male	Alawite	Urban	6	0	6
117	5D	38	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
118	7D	49	Male	Alawite	Urban	8	3	11
119	8D	43	Male	Sunni	Urban	6	0	6
120	9D	43	Male	Sunni	Urban	2	0	2
121	10D	25	Female	Christian	Rural	4	0	4
122	11D	30	Male	Alawite	Urban	0	5	5
123	12D	62	Male	Sunni	Urban	7	0	7
124	13D	27	Female	Alawite	Urban	4	0	4
125	14D	37	Male	Alawite	Urban	7	6	13
126	15D	22	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
127	18D	24	Female	Alawite	Urban	7	0	7
128	19D	54	Female	Alawite	Urban	0	4	4
129	20D	56	Female	Alawite	Urban	0	3	3
130	21D	60	Female	Alawite	Urban	1	4	5
131	22D	55	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	1	1
132	23D	44	Male	Alawite	Rural	0	4	4
133	24D	38	Male	Alawite	Urban	5	0	5
134	27D	32	Male	Alawite	Urban	4	0	4
135	28D	50	Male	Sunni	Urban	3	3	6
136	29D	49	Male	Christian	Rural	6	0	6
137	33D	53	Female	Alawite	Urban	5	1	6
138	34D	25	Female	Alawite	Urban	3	0	3
139	35D	52	Female	Sunni	Urban	7	0	7
140	52D	32	Female	Alawite	Urban	2	4	6
141	57D	66	Female	Alawite	Rural	0	3	3
142	62D	76	Male	Sunni	Urban	8	1	9
143	74D	17	Female	Alawite	Rural	3	8	11
144	126	30	Male	Sunni	Urban	4	0	4

Notes

[1] Two further forms belong to the Tartus picture but fall outside the present analysis. The fuller particle *ʕamma*, reported for other Syrian dialects (Klimiuk, 2025, p. 243), was marginal in the recordings (fewer than five tokens) and was excluded. The posture participle *qāʕid* 'sitting' never occurred on its own as a progressive marker in the recorded data. In the first author's observation, it may combine with either marker before the imperfect verb (*qāʕid ʕam*, *qāʕid ma-*), but no such combination occurred among the coded tokens. In this respect Tartus differs from the Khawētna dialect of eastern Syria, where *qēʕəd* functions as an autonomous marker interchangeable with the koine-borrowed *ʕam* (Talay, 1999, p. 182), and from Urban Jordanian Arabic, where the cognate *ʔāʕid* stands alone as a durative marker distinct from the immediate-aspect *ʕam* (Alhailawani & Al-Raba'a, 2024, pp. 9–12).

[2] The scheme orders the forms by degree of reduction and bondedness; it does not claim that each derives from the one before. In the first author's observation, the Tartus prefix may be realised with a geminate (*mma-*) under stress, and Brustad (2000, p. 247) records *mma* in northern Syria. Both observations suggest that the prefix may continue the fuller *ʕamma*, with loss of its initial syllable, and need not descend from *ʕam* at all. The origin of *ʕam* is itself unsettled: Cowell (1964, p. 320, n. 2) reports Feghali's derivation of *ʕam-* from *ʕan-* by assimilation to a following *b-*, which would make it unrelated to *ʕammāl*.

[3] Examples are given in a broad transcription: ʔ, glottal stop; ʕ, voiced pharyngeal fricative; *ḥ*, voiceless pharyngeal fricative; x and ɣ, velar fricatives; š and ž, postalveolar fricatives; q, uvular stop. A subscript dot marks pharyngealised (emphatic) consonants, a macron marks vowel length, and ə marks a short central vowel. The prefix *ma-* is written with a hyphen and the particle *ʕam* as a separate word. Glosses follow the Leipzig Glossing Rules; abbreviations are listed at the end of the article.

[4] Brustad writes *mma* as a separate particle with a geminate, whereas the present study treats *ma-* as a bound prefix. Identifying her *mma* with the Tartus prefix is our own analysis rather than a claim made in the source. If the identification is correct, Brustad's data show the reduced progressive already in use in northern Syrian speech before 2000.

[5] The rural age effect is the only result that depends on how the repeated tokens of each speaker are handled. It is significant in the mixed-effects model ($p = 0.038$) but not when an ordinary logistic regression is fitted with speaker-clustered standard errors ($p = 0.274$), and it should therefore be read as a weak tendency.

[6] Talay's usage elsewhere in the same volume supports this framing independently of AlShihry's interpretation. He describes comparable borrowed forms as spreading throughout Syria, the northeastern *qəltu* dialects included, as borrowings from the prestige dialects of Damascus and Aleppo (Talay, 1999, p. 179), and he ties the strength of koine influence in a village to its degree of contact with the city (p. 6). Neither passage concerns the progressive marker itself; both concern the contact-driven mechanism at issue here.

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