

Possession and Social Meaning: A Variationist Study of *ḥaq* and *māl* in Kuwaiti Arabic

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Abstract

This study investigates the morphosyntactic alternation between the analytic possessive markers *ḥaq* and *māl* in Kuwaiti Arabic within a variationist sociolinguistic framework. Although descriptive studies acknowledge the coexistence of these forms, no prior research has provided a systematic quantitative account of their distribution or examined whether their alternation is conditioned by grammatical and social factors. Drawing on a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews with 80 native speakers, the study operationalises the *ḥaq/māl* alternation within a carefully delimited envelope of variation. A total of 1,120 tokens were extracted and coded for linguistic predictors, including animacy and definiteness of the possessee, syntactic position, clause type, polarity, and register, alongside social variables such as age, gender, education, place of residence, and sectarian affiliation. Mixed-effects logistic regression analysis using Rbrul, with random effects for speaker and lexical item, revealed no statistically significant conditioning effects for any linguistic or social predictor. The distribution of *ḥaq* and *māl* remains consistent across grammatical contexts and speaker groups, suggesting that the alternation represents stable morphosyntactic variability rather than socially stratified variation or ongoing change. These findings point to functional convergence between two grammaticalised possessive markers within Kuwait's contact-rich and levelling sociolinguistic ecology. Processes of grammaticalisation, semantic bleaching, and dialect contact appear to have neutralised earlier functional distinctions and reduced the socioindexical salience of the alternation. Empirically, the study provides the first quantitative analysis of analytic possessive variation in Kuwaiti Arabic. Theoretically, it refines variationist models of socio-syntax by accounting for domains of stable grammatical optionality and underscores the value of null results in delimiting the social embedding of morphosyntactic variation.

Keywords: Kuwaiti Arabic, Morphosyntactic Variation, Possessive Constructions, Variationist Sociolinguistics, Dialect Contact, Grammaticalization.

1. Introduction

What a language uses to show possession is a central part of its meaning and structure, and languages do this in different ways with their grammar and word building. In both classical and modern standard Arabic, possession is shown mainly by using the *idāfa* (sometimes called the construct state) and by adding pronouns to the end of words (as Ryding in 2005 and Holes in 2018 explain). But in how people speak, more ways of showing possession have developed. These have come about through grammar becoming fixed, because of contact with other languages, and because of the way we use them (Owens, 2013). In Kuwaiti Arabic (KA), the words *ḥaq* and *māl* are two of these. They are used to link a possessor and a thing they own, or to show similar relationships.

Though they are often used as if they mean the same thing, they are not used at random. Instead, where you hear one or the other follows a pattern and is a good example of something to look at with the type of analysis William Labov suggested in 1972. From Labov's viewpoint, swapping between *ḥaq* and *māl* is a change in the structure of language. Speakers are choosing between the two forms based on the probabilities of grammatical and social rules. Using Labov's approach, the study will first decide the limits of where both words could be used with the same meaning. It will then investigate how the forms are affected by things within the language itself (like whether something is alive, specifically defined, a positive or negative statement, or the type of sentence) and by social things (the speaker's age, gender, education, where they live, and religious group). And, as is typical in variationist theory, the study expects the use of each word to be predictably affected by various elements, not a totally random choice.

This research offers a numerical, variationist view of how *ḥaq* and *māl* are used in KA. It intends to show if the change between them is a true change in the structure of language, within the defined limits of use, and to create a model of the grammatical rules affecting it (how something is alive, if it's specifically defined, the sentence type, its position in the sentence, if it is a positive statement, and how formal the language is). It will also look at how use correlates with social factors (age, gender, education, location, religion) and will interpret the results within a framework of how language and society connect and how language shows identity. The research will be the first to give numbers to the ways possession is shown in Kuwaiti Arabic and will determine if the difference in usage is because of grammar, social context, or if both forms are equally acceptable. The main goal is to answer the research questions:

1. What internal and external factors condition the choice between *ḥaq* and *māl*?
2. Does the alternation reflect broader processes of social differentiation or language change?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Variationist sociolinguistics, starting with the work of Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog in 1968 and Labov in 1972, sees differences in how people speak as a natural, organized part of knowing a language - it is not just mistakes or random slipping of the tongue. The idea is that people unconsciously have limits on which versions of a word or phrase they will use, and how those different versions are being used now is how we see language changing. For example, looking at how people of different ages say something (Labov, 1994) can show us a change happening. Variationist analysis treats the choice between those versions as being caused by a mix

of how language itself works (e.g., animacy, definiteness, clause type) and social factors (age, sex, location) (Labov, 1972, 1994, 2001).

A key idea in this kind of study is the ‘linguistic variable’ which Labov (1972: 271) defined as “two or more ways of saying the same thing” in a specific situation. It is found out what that ‘specific situation’ is by using something called the ‘envelope of variation’ (Labov, 1969; Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989). This defines where the different ways of saying something are comparable and so are actual variations. Being careful with this defining of the situation is important, especially for the structure of words and sentences (morphosyntax). That is because the different versions may only be a little bit the same in meaning and you have to prove that this is the case with evidence, so you do not mistakenly group completely different ways of doing things together as if they’re just alternatives (Poplack and Tagliamonte, 1989; Tagliamonte, 2006). Envelope-based reasoning has enabled probabilistic modelling of Arabic syntactic alternations, including word order and pro-drop in Jordanian Arabic (Al-Shawashreh, 2016).

Within the variable grammar model, multiple constraints interact to condition variant choice (Sankoff, 1988; Tagliamonte, 2006). Internal predictors often include morphosyntactic, semantic, and discourse factors such as grammatical function, animacy, definiteness, polarity, and information structure. Research shows that certain rules consistently influence how grammar changes in languages globally (Cameron, 1992; Otheguy & Zentella, 2012; Tagliamonte, 2011), and specifically within Arabic (Al-Shawashreh, 2016). Variationist theory also stresses how language is used in society, how differences in speech relate to social groups, and how these can show whether a change is happening or if the social structure is steady. Often, younger people, and women in many communities, are at the front of unconscious changes to how we speak (Labov, 1994, 2001). In Arabic, the link between social use and pronunciation is well known (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Al-Wer, 1991), and the link with grammar is being shown more and more (Al-Shawashreh, 2016).

The newer “third wave” approaches to this idea really highlight social meaning and what things signify. The differing ways we speak have areas of meaning and gain that meaning from being connected with attitudes, the roles we play, and our style (Eckert, 2008, 2012, 2019). This idea goes against the idea that grammar is not affected by society, and it shows that even small changes in grammar can become socially important within particular social situations (Eckert, 2012), particularly in places where the formal and informal language are very different or where many languages are in contact. In terms of methods, current variationist studies use something called mixed-effects logistic regression to look at several influences on speech at once, while considering that people and individual words are not entirely independent of each other (Johnson, 2009; Tagliamonte, 2011). This is a valuable improvement for grammatical variations because the words used and each speaker’s typical way of speaking can have a large impact.

Taken together, variable grammar, defining the “envelope” of a pattern, internal and external rules, looking at change over time, indexicality (meaning through association) and mixed-effects modelling all create the basis for analyzing the ḥaq/māl variation as a grammatical difference and to see if it is governed by its structure, by social factors, or by what it signifies socially. However, these perspectives do not all predict the same thing: a variationist view suggests a probable connection between structure and society, while third-wave approaches allow for the possibility that even minor grammatical differences could develop a local social meaning. This research will compare these possibilities, using ḥaq and māl as a case study.

2.2 Possessive Particles in Arabic Dialects

It is very common in spoken Arabic to use a way of showing possession that's built from analysing how things are put together, and this is happening because of grammatical change, influence from other languages, and possession being used in more ways. Along with the 'construct state' and how pronouns are added to words, many dialects have words that link things in a possessive relationship - Egyptian Arabic uses *bita'*, Levantine Arabic uses *tab'/ḥaqq*, and in the Gulf we find *ḥagg/ḥaq* and *māl* (according to Owens, 2013). These little words generally 'match' the thing that is possessed and are mostly found when people are speaking casually.

Over time, these linking words often come from nouns that originally meant 'right', 'something you own' or 'thing' and have morphed into words to show relationships (Brustad, 2000; and again Owens, 2013). In Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) *ḥaq* ('right') and *māl* ('something you own') are pretty much the same when linking things with a 'of' relationship (Holes, 2018). However, what has been said about this does not really say when you can swap them for each other, and it does not give any proof of how they are used in different kinds of speaking or by different social groups. Because of this, we do not know if being able to choose between them is a true option, if they have slightly different meanings, or if which one you use is linked to your background and how you speak. This is a perfect problem to investigate by looking at a lot of examples of how people speak, and no one has done that with numbers yet. To put it another way, what has been written so far is good for describing how things are, but does not offer much in the way of explanation: it shows that both words are used, but does not work out if this use follows a pattern, if they still have a little of their original meaning, or if they have come to do exactly the same thing.

2.3 Sociosyntactic Variation and Arabic: Empirical Precedents

Variationist theory gives us a solid way to understand different ways of building sentences as structured choices (Labov, tells us this in 1972, and Poplack and Tagliamonte in 1989). In the study of Arabic and society, Labov's ideas have been used most often for sounds (for example, the /q/ sound) (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Al-Wer, 1991), and the way words and grammar are put together has not been examined in a lot of detail with numbers and statistics (Bassiouny, 2020). Al-Shawashreh (2016) is a really important previous study: they used a model for word order and whether or not to say 'I' in Jordanian Arabic, and found the way these are done is reliably connected to how an action is done, whether something is specific, the type of sentence, and details of the subject of the sentence. Plus, social factors also had a noticeable impact and appeared to shift with time.

Abdel-Aziz, Jarrah, Altakhaineh and Al-Shawashreh (2024) are very similar, because they looked at how we show who something belongs to in Jordanian Arabic (using either the 'built in' way or a separate word) and used a method of 'envelope definition' with a lot of different statistics. Their findings showed that the language itself strongly affects it (specifically whether the owner is a person or thing, what the phrase does in the sentence, and if it is a specific thing). Where someone is from is also important, but age, being male or female, and how much education they have do not have much of an effect once the language aspects are considered.

This research goes with that growing amount of work, but instead of looking at different ways to construct a sentence, it looks at how two ways of showing possession (using *ḥaq* or *māl*) are in competition within the Kuwaiti Arabic dialect. As a result, it expands research on the relationship between society and the way sentences are constructed to include the Gulf Arabic

style and finds out if the same rules and social influences are at work where grammar and word forms meet.

2.4 Linguistic Constraints on Possessive Choice

What studies of different languages show is that how we show possession is affected by whether something is alive, how specific it is, and how well known it is to the listener (Comrie, 1986; Dahl & Fraurud, 2011). In spoken Arabic, the way we use the words showing possession seems to relate to whether something is alive and about the kind of relationship between the possessor and the thing possessed (Owens, 2013), though this has not often been proven with numbers.

Because animate (living) things that are being possessed are usually the focus of conversation and relate to relationships, they're likely to make us choose one word to show possession over another. How definite or specific something is might also be connected to how much it is the topic of conversation or is something that both people know. And the type of sentence or how formal or informal we are probably important in Arabic situations where people move between everyday speech and more official ways of speaking (Haeri, 2000). However, work on the Arabic languages of Kuwait (KA) does not have any firm, statistically based ways to understand these influences. Because of this, we do not know if the choice between *ḥaq* and *māl* to show possession is optional, depends on certain things, or has a specific function. So this research will use numbers to test these possible influences, instead of just saying they are possible based on observation.

2.5 Social Constraints and Indexical Meaning

What variationist research (Labov, 1972; 2001) has demonstrated is that how people use language changes in relation to their age, gender, level of schooling, where they're from, and the groups they belong to. Eckert (2008; 2019), using an indexical approach, has shown that language choices can also show what someone thinks or how they are positioning themselves. In the Gulf, differences in the structure of sentences (morphosyntax) can mark social divisions; for example, Persson (2017) has detailed how Shia and Sunni Muslims in Bahrain have differing ways of structuring sentences. More generally for Arabic, a woman's or a person's educational background can be linked to how they form sentences, and this mirrors how much they are aiming for a 'correct' style or using a broader Arabic form (Bassiouny, 2020).

However, Kuwait is socially and linguistically complicated and there have not been many numerical studies of what influences morphosyntax in Kuwaiti Arabic. What has been done, in a descriptive way, points to differences based on sect, region, and generation, but these differences have not often been used in complex statistical analyses. Because of this, we have not actually confirmed if '*ḥaq* and *māl*' have any social significance. This is why this study will use age, gender, schooling, where people live, and their religious affiliation in a variationist model. This is particularly necessary because just because something is not obviously socially important, it does not mean it is not. Only by doing numerical analysis can we answer that question.

2.6 Pragmatic and Discourse Functions

Possessive constructions may also vary by discourse-pragmatic factors, including information structure, emphasis, stance, and interpersonal positioning. Analytic possessives are often associated with interactionally rich, colloquial contexts where speakers negotiate affect and alignment (Brustad, 2000). For KA specifically, however, accounts of *ḥaq* and *māl* are largely

descriptive, and it remains unclear whether one marker is preferentially used in emphatic, contrastive, or evaluative contexts. To address this gap, the present study integrates quantitative modelling of internal and social constraints with qualitative attention to discourse contexts, enabling evaluation of whether alternation reflects structural optionality alone or also pragmatic differentiation.

2.7 Research Gap

The literature converges on a clear gap. Descriptive and historical work documents the emergence of analytic possessive particles across Arabic dialects (Brustad, 2000; Owens, 2013; Holes, 2018), including *ḥaq* and *māl* in Gulf Arabic, but provides limited usage-based evidence or systematic modelling. Variationist sociolinguistics offers tools for analysing such alternations as structured variables (Labov, 1972; Poplack & Tagliamonte, 1989), and recent Arabic sociosyntax studies, especially in Jordanian Arabic, demonstrate that morphosyntactic variation is both structurally constrained and, in some cases, socially embedded (Al-Shawashreh, 2016; Abdel-Aziz et al., 2024). However, Gulf Arabic remains underrepresented, and no study has quantitatively modelled alternation within analytic possessive markers in KA.

Consequently, there is: (i) no variationist account of *ḥaq* vs *māl* in KA; (ii) no systematic modelling of internal constraints on this choice; (iii) no empirical assessment of social embedding across age, gender, education, residence, and sectarian affiliation; and (iv) no analysis of potential indexical meanings of possessive choice in Kuwait's diglossic, contact-influenced ecology.

The present study addresses these gaps by operationalising *ḥaq/māl* as a morphosyntactic variable within a defined envelope of variation and modelling its distribution using mixed-effects multivariate analysis, complemented by qualitative discourse analysis. In doing so, it provides the first systematic account of analytic possessive variation in KA and extends sociosyntactic variation research to an underrepresented Gulf variety, contributing to debates on grammatical optionality, probabilistic morphosyntax, and the social life of grammar.

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a variationist sociolinguistic design (Labov, 1972, 2001; Tagliamonte, 2006) to model the alternation between the analytic possessive markers *ḥaq* and *māl* in KA as a morphosyntactic variable. In line with the principle of accountable explanation (Weinreich, Labov & Herzog, 1968), the research looks at the limits on how people speak, both from within the language itself and from the society around them, measures how likely each of these limits are to influence which way someone speaks, and then explains what all this means for language and social life in Kuwait.

The research is structured in ways that variationist analysts have used for looking at sentence structure, and this involves a number of things: putting together a collection of normal, unscripted spoken language, making sure the people in the collection represent the important social differences in the population, clearly deciding on the range of different ways of speaking to examine, and then categorizing both the language features and the social groups for more complex analysis. These established steps are being used to specifically investigate how possession is shown in the language of Kuwait, looking at both the language and society together.

3.2 Speech Community and Participant Sample

Speech Community

This research looks at people who speak KA (a variety of Arabic) in Kuwait City and the towns around it, a place with a complicated social picture formed by how the population, culture and language all affect each other. KA is not one single way of speaking. It has forms of speech that come from the historically city-based merchant families (called ḥaḍar) and those of the Bedouin tribes (badū), and for a long time there's been a relationship between city and Bedouin ways of speaking, where how you say things can show where you're from and who you're with. This variation in how people speak is important for how they build phrases to show possession, because the grammatical patterns used could show more general trends of being traditional, being modern, or how much they are affected by languages from outside.

In Kuwait, there is a very strong division of language: Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is used for school, religion, official news and in government, while KA is what people normally say to each other. Using a phrase construction to show possession is something people do in casual speech, so how often you hear it might change depending on how formal or informal the conversation is. Plus, Kuwait has a lot of people who are Arabic and English speakers (and have been since the 1960s, and this has grown with the world becoming more interconnected, through schools and businesses). Although people often adopt English words, speaking two languages together can also change the importance or spread of ways of structuring sentences, and this might then affect how or when those 'showing possession' constructions are used.

And finally, Kuwait has both Sunni and Shia communities, and different parts of the country, with social groups and where people live being somewhat separate. This affects how much contact people have with each other, how they learn things, and how differences in speech are smoothed out. All these things together make the Kuwaiti group of speakers a good place to examine if the choice between 'ḥaq/māl' (ways of expressing possession) is linked to someone's social group, how formal they are trying to be, whether it is remaining the same, or is in the process of changing.

Sampling and Stratification

The collection of data is made up of 80 people who are native speakers of Kuwaiti Arabic (KA) as the approved research plan said. This number of people lets us do complicate statistical analysis and ensures that important aspects of people's lives are fairly represented. We used a stratified sampling method (Labov, 2001; Tagliamonte, 2011) to get a good picture of how KA is spoken in relation to social factors and to avoid getting a lot of results from only one type of person.

The study considered five social factors that might have an effect: age, gender, education, where they live, and religious group. Age was divided into three groups (18–35, 36–50, 51+) so we could look at how KA is changing (or staying the same) over time as people get older (Labov, 1994). There were an equal number of men and women (40 of each). Education was recorded as either finishing secondary school or having a university degree; this is because of the difference in how much Modern Standard Arabic and English they have been exposed to and the possible differences in how much they consciously adjust their speech (Haeri, 2000; Bassiouney, 2020). Where someone lives was either Kuwait City (urban) or in the suburbs or more rural areas, and this indicates how much the location influences their language and how much contact they have with others. Religious affiliation was also equal between Sunni and Shi'i, as these groups have

different social groups and might have slightly different ways of speaking within the community (Holes, 1983; Herb, 2014).

All the people taking part in the study had to meet three requirements: they had to be born and brought up in Kuwait, be native Kuwaiti Arabic speakers, and use the dialect regularly in their daily lives. This is to make sure that the information we collected shows the ‘normal’ way people speak KA and is not speech that has been changed by other dialects or by living somewhere else for a short time.

Table (1): Sociodemographic composition of the participant sample (N = 80)

Social factor	Categories	n per category	Total (N)
Age	18–35	26–27*	80
	36–50	26–27*	
	51+	26–27*	
Gender	Men	40	80
	Women	40	
Education	Secondary education	40	80
	University degree	40	
Place of residence	Urban (Kuwait City)	40	80
	Suburban / semi-rural	40	
Sectarian affiliation	Sunni	40	80
	Shi‘i	40	

This balanced design supports interpretation of variant distributions as systematic social embedding rather than artefacts of participant imbalance.

3.3 Data Collection

All data were gathered from sociolinguistic interviews, and these were specifically designed to get people speaking ‘KA’ (as they normally would) in a natural, unforced way, following the ideas of Labov in 1972 and Tagliamonte in 2006. Each interview took around 45 to 60 minutes, and each person interviewed selected where it would happen (like at their home, in their office or somewhere familiar in their local area) so they would be comfortable and not have to be too formal. The interviews were not totally free form but had a structure, balancing being able to go with the conversation with questions that would probably bring up possessions, but without ruining the natural flow.

In the first part of the interviews, we talked about ordinary things – family, school, work, what people do each day - and this naturally led to conversations about relationships (family), things they have, what they oversee, and who or what they are connected to. Later, we asked people to tell stories, talk about events that mattered to them and give their opinions. This was to make it more probable that they would use the kind of sentence structures where the ‘analytic possessives’ are found. We were not using a strict list of questions but rather following up on what the person said to keep the conversation going.

Good quality digital audio recorders were used for all the interviews. Before they started, people were told about the study and what would happen, and they signed a form to say they understood and agreed (as they should, according to the ethical guidelines of the institution). We then removed any details that could identify the people involved and kept the recordings safe. To lessen the ‘observer’s paradox’ (as Labov described in 1972), the interviews began with casual

small talk, and the interviewer tried to be friendly and conversational and not give any judgement. This was to make sure people were not overly aware of how they were speaking.

3.4 Transcription and Coding

Interviews were transcribed completely, using a detailed phonetic system. This system captured important aspects of the pronunciation and structure of Kurdish Arabic but was still easy to read and fit with how sociolinguistic research is done in Arabic. Where useful for understanding the sentence structure, we also included things like pauses, words to guide the conversation, when people talk over each other and when they correct themselves, in the written versions.

Transcribing happened in three steps. First, we broke the speech up and did a first attempt at writing it down as normal spelling. Then we very carefully checked the bits that might contain 'ḥaq' and 'māl', listening to the recording of these sections, especially when the speech was fast or the sounds were blended. Finally, we looked at the entire transcript to be sure the notes and labels were used the same way throughout. We focused especially on how sounds get shorter or change because of surrounding sounds; this could hide the actual pronunciation of 'ḥaq' and 'māl'.

After we had the transcripts, we looked at each time 'ḥaq' and 'māl' appeared and added a code to each one for a lot of figures. These figures were for both the language of the instance and information about the speaker. The language information included whether what's being possessed is animate or not, and if it is specific or not, its place in the sentence, the sentence's type, whether it is positive or negative, and how formal the speech is. We also noted how complex the structure of the phrase being possessed was, if it was useful to do so. And the social information (age, gender, education, where someone lives, their religious group) came from details about the person speaking and did not change for all their examples.

It was important to make sure we only used examples where both 'ḥaq' and 'māl' would be acceptable and would have the same meaning. We left out phrases that have become fixed, sayings, and cases where something else in the meaning or how it is said stops them from being interchangeable. This way the data showed the actual choice between the two forms in the grammar, instead of them simply being used in entirely different situations. Roughly 10% of the coded data was checked by a second person to make sure it was reliable.

3.5 Social and Linguistic Predictors

Social Factors

We looked at five things in people's lives to see how they might affect language: how old they are, if they are male or female, their level of education, where they live, and their religious group. Age is useful for looking at whether the way people speak changes over time (as Labov said in 1994 and 2001). We included gender because it is well known to be connected to how much respect a way of speaking has, the area someone is from, and differences in style (again, Labov 2001). Education shows how much formal time someone has spent with standard Arabic and English and how good they are at being aware of and altering the way they speak (Haeri, 2000; Bassiouney, 2020). Sectarian affiliation is included to test possible community-based norms linked to partially distinct networks (Herb, 2014; Holes, 1983). Each factor group was coded as mutually exclusive to support interpretability and minimise multicollinearity in modelling.

Linguistic Factors and Register Operationalisation

Linguistic predictors were selected based on variationist research and possessive typology: animacy, definiteness, syntactic position, clause type, polarity, and register. These factors capture semantic prominence, information structure, syntactic embedding, and stylistic monitoring—domains known to influence probabilistic morphosyntax.

Register was operationalised as degree of monitoring within the interview rather than as a fixed speaker trait. Interviews were segmented into functionally distinct stretches: (i) informal conversational/narrative talk and (ii) more monitored/semi-formal stretches (e.g., explicit evaluations, explanations, justifications, metalinguistic commentary). Coding relied on explicit indicators (e.g., metalinguistic framing, self-repair toward “correctness,” formal evaluative formats). A subset of tokens was double-coded to check reliability, and disagreements were resolved via rule-based criteria.

3.6 Statistical Analysis

Quantitative analysis was conducted in Rbrul (Johnson, 2009) using mixed-effects logistic regression, appropriate for a binary outcome and current best practice in variationist modelling. The dependent variable was the marker selected (*māl* vs *ḥaq*), with *māl* set as the application value. Independent variables included the linguistic and social predictors described above. Random intercepts were included for speaker and lexical item to control for idiosyncratic behaviour and item-specific preferences, improving generalisability.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, descriptive statistics (frequencies, proportions, cross-tabulations) provided an overview of distributions across contexts and groups and helped identify sparse cells. Second, multivariate modelling estimated the independent contribution of each predictor via regression coefficients while controlling for others. We also looked at how language and social stuff might affect each other, specifically when we had a good reason to think they would. For choosing the best model, we compared simpler models with more complex ones, keeping the parts of the complex model that made it a better fit to the data (using likelihood ratio tests and information criteria) and getting rid of groups that were not doing anything to make it more efficient. And, following Labov (1994, 2001), we looked at things from the ‘apparent time’ angle - that is, by looking at how things are distributed and how the model works across different age groups. Finally, we ran checks to make sure the results had reached a stable point, that variables were not overly related to each other, that we were not relying on too few examples, and to identify any single result that had a massive effect.

3.7 Reliability and Validity

We checked the accuracy of the transcriptions by carefully comparing them to the actual recordings, and about 10% of the analysed data was looked at by a second person. When there were differences, we talked them over and improved our instructions for coding. As for how well the study measures what it is supposed to, we were really careful to only look at situations where things did change. This meant the findings show how people are shaped by their lives and society, not just by the simple meanings of words or how we use them. Because of the way we chose a diverse but representative selection of people, the results are likely to apply to many social groups. During the statistical work, we dealt with issues of too few data points, variables being too related, and the model not being able to reach a conclusion, and we only kept models that were both good in terms of the statistics and sensible in terms of the ideas behind them.

3.8 Ethical Considerations

This study followed all the normal ethical rules for research with people. Before their interviews, everyone taking part was told in plain language what the study was about and what would happen, and they all signed a consent form to say they agreed. Being in the study was entirely up to each person, and they could stop at any time, for any reason, and nothing bad would happen to them if they did.

We made sure their privacy was protected by removing anything from the recordings and typed versions of the interviews that could show who they are, instead using codes. The data was kept very safely and only used for the academic research. People had their interviews where they wanted them to happen, to help them relax and not be anxious. Plus, the study itself was done the way our institution's ethics committee said it should be.

4. Findings

A total of 1,120 tokens of analytic possessive constructions were extracted from the sociolinguistic interviews. Of these, 702 tokens (62.7%) involved *ḥaq*, while 418 tokens (37.3%) involved *māl*, indicating an overall preference for *ḥaq* in the corpus. Table (2) below shows the overall frequency of possessive markers in the corpus.

Table (2): Overall frequency of possessive markers in the corpus (N = 1,120)

Variant	Tokens	Percentage
ḥaq	702	62.7%
māl	418	37.3%

Although this raw distribution shows frequency asymmetry, both variants occur across all social groups and linguistic environments, suggesting substantial functional overlap.

We used Rbrul to do a mixed-effects logistic regression, with how much “māl” was used being the main thing we looked at. Also, we allowed for some difference between each speaker, and for each actual word. The regression included all the linguistic factors we had (how ‘alive’ something is, and whether it is specifically identified, the place of the thing being possessed in the sentence, the kind of sentence, if it is positive or negative, and how formal or informal it is), and all the social details of the speakers (their age, if they are male or female, their level of schooling, where they live, and which branch of religion they’re in).

However, against what we expected from earlier work on how word forms change, none of these factors were shown to be statistically important. The numbers showing their effect all grouped near 0.

Table (3): Mixed-effects logistic regression results for the alternation between *ḥaq* and *māl* (N = 1,120)

Factor group	Level	Log-odds	Tokens	% māl	Centred factor weight	p-value
Age group	18–35	0.02	501	0.38	0.51	n.s.
	36–50	-0.01	309	0.37	0.50	
	51+	-0.01	310	0.36	0.49	
Gender	Female	0.02	413	0.38	0.51	n.s.
	Male	-0.02	707	0.36	0.49	
Sectarian affiliation	Sunni	0.01	805	0.37	0.50	n.s.

	Shi'i	-0.01	315	0.38	0.50	
Education	Secondary	-0.01	560	0.37	0.50	n.s.
	University	0.01	560	0.38	0.50	
Animacy (possessee)	Animate	0.02	412	0.38	0.51	n.s.
	Inanimate/abstract	-0.02	708	0.36	0.49	
Definiteness	Definite	-0.01	690	0.37	0.50	n.s.
	Indefinite	0.01	430	0.38	0.50	
Syntactic position	Subject	0.01	355	0.38	0.50	n.s.
	Object/other	-0.01	765	0.36	0.50	
Clause type	Main clause	0.00	820	0.37	0.50	n.s.
	Embedded clause	0.00	300	0.37	0.50	

Table (3) demonstrates that which version of the word speakers chose was not really affected by any of the language or social factors we looked at. Taking out one factor at a time did not make the model much worse, and when we checked the model itself, it did not have issues with being unable to reach a conclusion, having very distinct groups, or having too few instances of something to be reliable, which could have explained why we did not see any effects. The overall chance of someone saying *māl* (0.373) was pretty much the same as how often *māl* actually shows up in all the data.

Looking at the basic numbers for each category also did not show any regular groupings by age, gender, how much schooling someone has, where they live, or what religious section they belong to. Younger and older speakers liked one version no more than the other, and we did not find any patterns based on gender or education. Likewise, the use of *ḥaq* and *māl* stayed the same whether the thing being possessed was alive or not, whether the noun was specific or not, if it was the subject or object of the sentence, in the main part of the sentence or in a smaller section within it, whether the sentence was positive or negative, or if the conversation was casual or more carefully spoken.

Therefore, within the limits of how the word changes, the switch between using *ḥaq* and *māl* is not noticeably linked to the way it is used in a sentence or the social situation.

5. Discussion

What this study shows is that people's use of *ḥaq*/*māl* does not seem to be noticeably affected by how they speak or their social situation. This is not just a 'nothing happened' result. It is valuable for the way we do variationist research, because it tells us where grammar and society do not strongly influence things. Basically, this finding demonstrates that not every part of a word's structure with different forms (its morphosyntax) is going to neatly break down along social lines or become a place where language is changing. Some of these differences, instead, can simply settle into being a matter of grammatical choice, and that helps to improve our ideas about how society and language structure connect. In the present case, the absence of significant effects suggests that the *ḥaq*/*māl* alternation is best understood not as change in progress, but as a stable domain of morphosyntactic optionality. Rather than indicating methodological inadequacy, this null-effect pattern suggests that the alternation represents a domain of stable morphosyntactic variability in which competing forms coexist without strong probabilistic weighting. As Labov (1972, 2001) emphasises, variation is structured—but structured variability does not necessarily entail stratification or change in progress. In this respect, the present findings align with

Tagliamonte's (2006, 2011) observation that some morphosyntactic variables stabilise as zones of grammatical optionality once earlier functional distinctions have eroded.

Variationist research has demonstrated that not all variables exhibit comparable levels of conditioning. While phonological variables frequently show robust social and linguistic stratification (Labov, 1994), morphosyntactic alternations vary in their susceptibility to embedding. The near-identical distribution of *ḥaq* and *māl* across semantic, syntactic, and stylistic contexts suggests that speakers treat the two forms as functionally equivalent within the vernacular grammar of KA. In Tagliamonte's (2011) terms, this represents stable variation rather than change in progress, characterised by the absence of age grading or probabilistic differentiation across contexts.

This functional equivalence is consistent with grammaticalization theory. Historically, *ḥaq* ('right, entitlement') and *māl* ('property, wealth') originated as lexical nouns before developing into possessive linkers. Grammaticalization typically involves semantic bleaching and functional expansion, resulting in increased overlap between forms (Hopper & Traugott, 2003). Because the lack of any connection between these markers and whether something is alive or specifically identified means any earlier specific meanings have disappeared, both now just generally show possession. They do this in a way that does not depend on the situation, which fits with what Brustad (2000) and Owens (2013) said about how similar Arabic ways of showing possession are to each other in function.

Looking at the social situation in Kuwait explains why there are not any social distinctions in how this works. City growth, the way the language of more settled people (*ḥaḍar*) mixes with that of nomadic groups (*badū*), and lots of different types of connections between people all create a situation where differences in dialects are disappearing (Trudgill, 1986; Kerswill, 2008). Holes (2011) has recorded similar merging of language in Gulf Arabic communities, and in these places particular grammatical features gradually lose their ability to show something about the speaker. Because of this, the possession markers are used equally by all groups of people: Shia and Sunni, those in different areas, men and women, and young and old. This means they are now a common part of the way people speak in a wider area, rather than being something a person uses to signal their social position.

These results also point to how much "social meaning" low-profile grammatical features can have. Eckert (2008, 2019) and the "third wave" of language study suggest variables get social meaning when they become part of a system of associations. But not every feature does gain that importance. Possessive particles do not stand out to the ear or have the strong opinions usually connected with sounds people judge socially. Without people thinking about them and what they say about the speaker, there is not much reason for anyone to choose one form over another to express who they are or how they are speaking, and so it is harder for clear social patterns to develop.

Diglossia (the difference between formal and informal language) may also make things more stable. Haeri (2000) and Bassiouney (2020) point out that these possessives are used in everyday speech, while the construct state is associated with Modern Standard Arabic. Since this broader difference between styles already shows how people are being stylistic, the small changes within the everyday possession markers probably do not carry much extra social or stylistic weight. The main difference in style is between using the analytic way of showing possession and the synthetic way, not between *ḥaq* and *māl* themselves.

All this together does not go against variationist theory but makes it more precise. Tagliamonte (2011) says that showing something does not have a connection is as useful for theory as showing something does have a connection, because it tells us where socially linked variation stops. It looks as though the choice between *ḥaq* and *māl* has reached a point of balance, both in how they work and socially, in how people speak Kuwaiti Arabic today. This illustrates that the ‘life’ of a grammatical feature can end with them merging and being freely interchangeable, instead of being tied to social groups.

6. Conclusion

This study provided a quantitative, variationist account of the alternation between the analytic possessive markers *ḥaq* and *māl* in KA. By modelling the alternation within a rigorously defined envelope of variation and employing mixed-effects regression with random effects for speaker and lexical item, the analysis tested whether variant choice was conditioned by internal grammatical factors or external social predictors.

The central finding is the absence of statistically significant conditioning across all tested linguistic and social variables. Once speaker and lexical effects were controlled for, no factor group reliably influenced the selection of *ḥaq* or *māl*. Rather than undermining variationist expectations, this result refines them: it identifies a domain of stable morphosyntactic variability in which competing forms coexist without strong probabilistic weighting. The alternation appears to represent functional and social equilibrium rather than stratified variation or change in progress.

At the grammatical level, the findings indicate functional convergence between two historically distinct lexical items. Both forms appear to have undergone grammaticalisation and semantic bleaching. Both markers now operate as general analytic possessive linkers in contemporary KA, with no detectable semantic or syntactic specialisation. At the social level, the absence of stratification across age, gender, education, residence, and sectarian affiliation suggests that the alternation has not been recruited into socially meaningful differentiation. Within Kuwait’s contact-rich, urbanised, and levelling sociolinguistic ecology, analytic possessive marking has stabilised as a shared supra-local vernacular resource.

More broadly, the study demonstrates that null results are theoretically informative: they delineate the limits of social embedding in morphosyntactic variation and highlight the possibility that grammatical variables may culminate in convergence rather than stratified change. Practically, these findings caution against assuming that all morphosyntactic alternations in Arabic are socially stratified or undergoing change. They also highlight the importance of strict envelope definition and multivariate modelling in future research on Arabic morphosyntax, especially when investigating apparently synonymous variants. In doing so, the research extends quantitative sociosyntactic analysis to an underrepresented Gulf variety and contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Arabic grammatical variation. Pedagogically, the results also show you should not describe or explain *ḥaq* and *māl* in modern Kuwaiti Arabic as being very clearly and distinctly ways to show possession. They’re more like a lot of the same casual ways of speaking, and how often you hear each one needs to be discovered by looking at how people speak, not by deciding ahead of time how they should be used.

For future study, things that are not covered by looking at the big picture are worth investigating. Looking closely at how people interact in conversation, what they mean by how they say things, and the rhythm of speech, might show slight differences in attitude or how the

conversation flows that affect which of the two is chosen. Observing people in their lives and looking at the way groups within the community use language could reveal very small social meanings that demographic divisions do not show. Comparing the Arabic dialects of the Gulf region will show if this blending together of the two words is happening throughout the area, or if it is just something this community does.

Ethical approval

This study was approved by the Proposal and Ethics Committee of the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. All procedures were conducted in accordance with applicable institutional research guidelines of the University of Jordan.

Informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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