There are various ways in which religious affiliation can present itself as a sociolinguistic variable in Arabic dialects. The best-documented case is probably that of Baghdadi Arabic, in which Blanc (1964) reports that three “communal dialects” exist (or existed, until virtually all Jewish Iraqis emigrated westward) – the mainstream Muslim koiné, and a Christian and Jewish variety, which share certain structural (e.g., phonological) features with one another.

While in Iraqi Arabic the sectarian distinction appears to be a part of speakers’ cognition, above their level of awareness, the situation in the Levant is more complex. On the one hand, we read statements such as in Shahin (2008) on Palestinian Arabic (2008): “Differences exist based on religion; Christian speech might tend to be more urban” – and indeed it is commonly believed that Christian Levantine Arabic is more “modern, fast-paced, sophisticated” than Muslim Levantine, even if spoken in rural areas. On the other hand, recent research (Al-Wer et al. 2013) suggests that in reality, Christian varieties in, e.g., Jordan, illustrate use of far older features in both phonology and morphology than do Muslim varieties. Unlike the Baghdad case, however, the Jordanian study goes against public perception and may therefore be construed as unearthing a sociolinguistic distinction that is below the community’s level of consciousness.

The current study draws on data from the Palestinian city of Jaffa. It addresses three features of the city dialect that appear to have changed as a result of two significant sociohistorical forces, namely the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine – the Nakba – which led to Hebrew taking over as the main language of communication in the region; and increasing religiosity amongst the Muslim population of Palestine. These two forces work in opposite directions: the former towards convergence, partly due to contact with Hebrew, and the latter towards divergence.

Convergence occurs in the domains of phonology and morphosyntax, as illustrated by such features as the shortening of long vowels and acquisition of the formerly Christian-only genitive exponent šeːt. An example of divergence is the politicized refusal of Christians to use traditionally Muslim lexical phrases, e.g., al-salaːmu ʕalːeːkum, whose usage speakers report to have increased as a result of heightened Muslim religious practice, including pilgrimage to Mecca, in recent decades.

What is interesting about the data presented in this paper is that several older speakers in Jaffa have vivid recollections – anecdotal as they may be – of how people used to speak, and who used to speak how, aligning certain features with demographic factors such as religious affiliation and gender. We have learned, e.g., of the Christian origin of šeːt, from one such testimony. This may be characterized as a hybrid or intermediate type of sectarian variety classification, between the Baghdad model and the Jordanian one, as it is above the level of awareness for a sub-section of the speech community, but increasingly disappearing from the awareness of the younger generations thereof.