

Arabizi: Is Code-Switching a Threat to the Arabic Language

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Abstract

The Arabic language is widely spoken all over the world and is the official language in twenty-three Arab countries. Moreover, the classic Arabic language is the language of Quran, and Muslims in Turkey, Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia aspire to learn it. The word Arabizi is a mixture of Arabic and English languages, in which Arabic words are written using English letters. Many young Arabs who study in private schools that use English as a language of instruction, prefer Arabizi in texting and conversations on their smart phones and social media because they find typing in English easier than in Arabic. For this reason there is a pronounced fear that Arabizi will weaken the Arabic language, or even replace it, and threatens Arab identity, as well as, the Arab value system. This paper used three focus groups to explore how college students in an Arab country use and perceive Arabizi. The paper concludes that the majority of respondents stated that compared to classic Arabic language, Arabizi is more expressive, trendy, and cool. The majority of the respondents also said that lack of adequate Arabic language in private schools, lack of speaking Arabic at home, as well as the smartphones and social media contributed to the wide use of Arabizi. They also stated that the use of Arabizi is a threat to the Arabic language and Arab identity.

Keywords: Arabizi; Code-switching; Language shift; Language Imperialism

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Introduction

Arabizi, is basically typing the Arabic language letters in English letters, or mixing the Arabic language alphabet with English letters and fitting in English words in between. Young Arabs tend to use the Arabizi more often, because it's easier for them to express themselves and avoid mistakes and typos that could develop if they use the classic or Standard Arabic language. This type of language mixing is also called code-switching. Code switching is defined as the usage of two or more between participants in a conversation (Skiba, 1997; Abu Mathkour, 2004). Scotton (1993) discusses the different types of languages that are used in code switching and refers to the language that is used more as the Matrix Language (ML), while the language that is used lesser as the Embedded Language (EL). In Arabizi, Arabic numbers and other symbols are added to replace Arabic letters that have no equivalents in English or French. For example صباح الخير (means "Good Morning") is written as "9aba7 2l5air". Thus, the Arabic letter ح is replaced with a 7, the ع with a 3, and the ء with a 2 (Hasselblatt, Houtzagers & van Pareren, 2011). Ghanem (2011) defines Arabizi as defined as the modernized Arabic language, in a nut shell it is Arabic in the English language.

Review of the literature

Many studies have examined code-switching involving the Arabic language and other European languages (Abassi, 1977; Lahlou, 1991; Al-Khatib, 2003; Bassiouney, 2006; Edwards & Dewaele, 2007; Attwa, 2012). A number of studies (El-Hassan, 1978; Beni Yasin & Owens, 1987) that examined and compared the Standard Arabic with its variants suggest that the closer the variant to the *fus-ha*, "the higher its prestige"(Miller & Caubet, 2010, p. 242). Yet, this postulate was challenged by some scholars who saw the utility of the other variants in different situations and contexts (Abdel Jawad, 1987). When language contact occurs, an ethnic group wielding more power and authority bestows prestige and symbolic power on its language (La Ponce, 2004). The process of displacing other languages in favor of a dominant language can arguably be described as "symbolic domination"(Bourdieu, 1991). In this respect the work of Foucault (1970; 1981) on power as well as Habermas' (1981) communicative theory provide important insights on the exclusionary dimensions on discourse.

Research on language and ethnic identity led to the development of language ideology (Woodlard, 1998). To understand sociolinguistic transformation, we have to consider an interplay between linguistic anthropology (Hymes, 1964; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986; Durante, 1997) and semiotics, where the choice of codes and signs reflect power relations and "carry meanings beyond their referential ones and may index certain ethnic and other identities or situations of use"(Makihara, 2010, p. 41). The Arabic language played an important in shaping Arab identity. Since language and culture are inseparable, some Arab nationalists aspired to use Arabic as a nationalist homogenizing language, and opposed linguistic diversity (Suleiman, 1994; 2003). A number of studies using Labovian class paradigm documented the relationships between language, class, and identity in a number of countries around the globe (Abdel-Jawad, 1981; Kallas, 1999; Kochetov, 2006; Mallinson, 2007; Dodworth, 2010). They indicated that, in general, the use of standard language is associated with upper and middle classes. Labov's (1966a; 1966b; 2001) findings suggest that the use of the standard English language is considered prestigious by across social strata.

The presence of classic Arabic language continues to be central to the Arab identity as well as the Islamic civilization. Unfortunately “Arabic language skills in everyday life have deteriorated, and Arabic ... has in effect ceased to be a spoken language” (Salameh, 2011).

Arabic is the official language for twenty-three Arab, The African Union, as well as the Organization of Islamic Conference, and a working language in the United Nations. More importantly, its the language of the Quran. Thus, even Islamic countries whose national languages are not Arabic, including Turkey, Iran, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia, exert efforts to teach their citizens the Arabic language. O’Sullivan (2011) explains how the Arabic language has found its way of originality as the Arabic speakers now use their language to talk among themselves on social media. The Arabic language is one of the oldest Semitic languages, carrying a flavor of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Arabic became more prominent during the rise of the Islamic empire (Young, 1999).

A number of Arab linguists have referred to the continuing deterioration of the classic Arabic language "Fus-ha" to the modern standard Arabic. *Al fus-ha* is a standardized variety, highly codified in grammar books and dictionaries; it is accepted and has validity as a standard of correctness across the Arabic speaking world (Ibrahim & Makhoulf, 2010). Today, very few Arabs speak the *fus-ha* and Arab countries have different dialects. The Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), is a closer variant to the *fus-ha*.

Hanani (2009) discusses globalization and refers to the importance of English in securing a promising career. She refers to the dangers that English language poses to the Arabic language, and argues that the Arabic language is being lost and the young Arab generation is beginning to lose the capacity to think and create in Arabic. Badr ad-Deen (2011), describes Arabizi phenomenon as "cultural subordination". The use of the English language in formal education in many private schools, coupled by the wide use of English on social media (Ibrahim & Makhoulf, 2008) make it harder for Arab students to be fluent in reading and writing their mother tongue language, the Arabic language.

Sridhar (1994) reflects on the UNESCO’s 1957 theme of giving every child the right to be educated in their mother tongue language, and asserts that that as long as languages are preserved or lost solely through socioeconomic power, weaker languages will inevitably disappear. Linck, Kroll, and Sunderman (2009) argue that while learning a second language, the native language is inhibited, even if it’s an English language itself.

Dahan (2005) argues culture is embedded in the English language curriculum and textbooks, suggesting that teaching of English as an international language should be culturally sensitive and responsive to local cultural contexts. Thus, in curricula teaching English to speakers of other languages it’s advisable that English textbooks for government schools should be regularly evaluated for their efficiency in teaching the English language as well as their cultural relevance and suitability (Al-Falasi, 2008).

Ahmad (2011) laments the fact that some Arab parents encourage their children to speak only English, causing their children to distance themselves from Islam if they were Muslims. He opines, it is a matter of showing off or to satisfy one's egoistic self with the feeling of superiority among their peers. Talhouk (2010), claims that “The

youth think that speaking this language [Arabic] isn't 'cool' and don't hesitate to mix foreign words in their conversation" (para.6). According to Alkury's documentary (2005), "Some young people look down on Arabic language. They think it is old and that English represents life and desires" (Jordanian elite shows off with Arabizi, 2005). The Western media bestow glamour on English and French languages, rendering the Arabic language, "too complicated, time-consuming and old-fashioned for Lebanese youth" (Meehan, 2010). Ghanem (2011) asserts that Arabizi has adversely affected the Arab students' performance in the Arabic language.

Suzanne Talhouk, the president of the "Fiil Amr" ("Act Now!") association, which is leading a campaign to protect the Arabic language, along with the Arab Thought Foundation, argues that the language of culture, philosophy and science has always been Arabic. Regrettably, an increasing number of Arab youngsters feel ashamed of speaking Arabic because it's not perceived as 'cool'. They believe that acculturation, including speaking and behaving like Europeans as more modern and professional. On the other hand, Sadek (2007) asserts that Arab students feel uncomfortable toward the dominance of the English language.

In United States, the English language, a foreign language, became dominant and displaced other indigenous and European languages because of its prestige and utility as an achievement enhancer and a common language (Wiley, 2010). Jenkins (2005) discusses the importance of English language in advertising and commerce and argues that one inevitable effect of the spread of global English is its killing of other languages. Crystal (1997) provides great insights into the influence of English as a global language and the controversies that it bring including the death of some languages across countries. Some scholars have considered the dominance of the English language as language imperialism (Phillipson, 1992). Kachru (1992) examines how people in different countries have adopted the English language and altered it to fit it into their own cultural context and understanding; this, in turn, explains the rapid expansion of the language. On the other hand, Sonntag (2003) refers to the resistance toward the introduction of English in France, and highlights the bombing of a McDonald's as a protest against the "Englishization" of France.

The impact of globalization during the past two or three decades, allowed the English language to occupy a singular position among language" (Hjarvard, 2004). That linguistic dominance was facilitated by the spectacular rise of the American power. The glamour of the American media and the appeal of the Western education made English the first language of 341 million people in 1999 and first or second language of about 500 million (Hjarvard, 2004). Daoudi (2011) refers to the influence of globalization on the Arabic language, and refers to a new emerging language as e-Arabic. The e-Arabic is a combination of English and Arabic fueled by the wide use smartphones and the Internet, mainly blogs, emails, and social networks. The wide use of smart phones, popularity of text messaging (SMS), and social media made it more easier to use Arabizi and the slang English as languages of online communication (Daoudi, 2011; Shakkaf, 2012). Yet, the language is important because it embodies and mirrors the historical and religious experiences of nations which makes it the single most important component of a nation's identity (Abed, 2007).

Soliman (2008) argues that adults switch to English when they seek objectivity and academic terms, whereas children, whose main language is English, switch to other languages to get cultural and religious terms. Code-switching also occurs when the speaker is upset, or depressed, or wants to establish unity with specific social groups. In Jordan, code switching is used by the upper class and is considered stylish and classy (Robertson, 2007). In some situations, some people use code-switching between Arabic and English to exclude other people who do not speak or understand the second language (Skiba, 1997). Abu Mathkour's (2004) study finds that Jordanian participants used Arabic-English code switching to satisfy these conversational functions, including Quotation; Interjection or sentence filler; Reiteration; Message Qualification; and Personification.

In the Arab world, the new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have intensified the use of code-switching, because typing in English has become easier than Arabic because the Arabic letters on the mobile's keypad are more than the Roman letters. Thus, typing Arabic letters is considered to be difficult and time-consuming. A number of studies (Crystal, 2008; Bashraheel, 2008; Ritz, 2012) suggest that Arabizi users find typing in English efficient, convenient, and fun to write. According to Rouchdy (2011) some people use Arabizi because "it was easier than typing Arabic." Moreover, some Arabizi users find it more efficient to type in English because they are used to it (Alkhatib & Sababah, 2008).

Some Arabizi users prefer writing in English rather than Arabic because they perceive English as prestigious because it's the language of the "educated" and "knowledgeable" people. Secondly, the use English rather than Arabic can be attributed to the English terminology in science and medicine where equivalent Arabic terms are lacking or unknown to the speaker. In some instances, euphemism is used when English words seem less offensive or hurtful compared to Arabic words, particularly in subjects pertaining to disease, love, and body functions (AlKhatib & Sabbah, 2008). Moreover, in greetings, sometimes, people switch from English to Arabic when they exchange traditional Arabic/Islamic greetings "al salamu 3alaikom", or "ahlan", "inshalla", "ya rab". Finally, switching from English to Arabic takes place when quoting someone's Arabic words, and the writer encounters difficulty in translating that quote into English (AlKhatib & Sabbah, 2008)

A number of scholars have pointed out that some ancient indigenous native American, European, and Asian languages are endangered (Baranova, 2005; Kleiner & Svetozarova, 2006; Gulida, 2010; Dorian, 2010) by the powerful influence of the English language. Opponents of Arabizi, namely Islamists, argue that the Arabic language is the language of the Quran, and when the Arabic language is not typed or spoken appropriately people are undermining its value. Arab nationalists are also not in favor of Arabizi. They believe that using the Roman letters endangers the existence of the Arabic language, and undermines the Arab identity and may replace it with a foreign one. Recently, Arabizi emerged in some television programs, mass media messages, and commercials, which many people consider unprofessional, inadequate and unacceptable (Nashef, 2013; Elshamly & AbdelGhaffar, 2011; Bashraheel, 2008).

Method

This research used three focus groups in a Middle Eastern private university. Focus group 1 (FG1) included seven participants (ages: 19-23) and convened in March 2014; focus group 2 (FG2) included six participants (ages: 18-22), and convened in July, 2014; and focus group 3 (FG3) included seven participants (ages: 19-24), and convened in October, 2014. Each focus group met for one hour. The moderators of the focus groups were knowledgeable about the subject of the study. The research questions dealt with various issues pertaining to the participants' perception and use of Arabizi, their proficiency in Arabic, the role of the parents as well as the language of instruction in private schools. The questions also examined the effects of smartphones and social media, and the threat that Arabizi poses to the Arabic language and Arab identity.

Findings

When asked why people use Arabizi and not Standard Arabic language, focus group 1 (FG1) stated that: easier to type; sign of prestige and class; convenient for our generation, since we speak and use English most of the time. FG 2 said: difficult to express one's self in Arabic; It's a trend; and FG3 added that: more expressive; modern; feel cooler; easy for different nationalities. When asked if the use of Arabizi is related to lack of use of Arabic language at home, five participants of the FG1 said no, and two said that some parents prefer English. The majority of the participants in the FG3 asserted that parents do not speak Arabic at home, and kids learn speaking skill at home. Nonetheless, the majority of the participants of FG2 said that most parents speak Arabic at home.

Arabizi is related to lack of adequate use of the Arabic language in private schools, according to most of the participants. In FG1, they agreed and said: Because children are influence by the West; Schools don't give equal time to Arabic; if one doesn't speak English one looks uneducated. The FG2 stated that: Those who study English curricula find Arabizi easy; Parents not paying attention to children Arabic writing skills; and the participants in the FG3 concurred and added that because schools force a persons to prefer English. Attributing the use of Arabizi to lack of proficiency in the Arabic language generated conflicting responses. The majority of the participants in the FG1 agreed; because lack of emphasis on Arabic; Arabic seems hard and Arabizi is easy; One participant disagreed and said, even proficient in Arabic they use Arabizi. In the FG2: the majority of participants disagreed; yet said, Arabizi is easier than Arabic. All the participants in the FG3 said lack of proficiency in Arabic lead to Arabizi; those who don't feel confident in Arabic use Arabizi.

When asked whether Arabizi helps them make their point more clear the majority of the participants in the three focus groups agreed. The FG1 stated: we use Arabizi when we are stuck in a word. The FG2 concurred and added: vocabularies of two languages help; good for multinational cultures. The FG3 agreed but added: it depends on the receiver, and the topic.

The majority of FG1 agreed that the use of Arabizi make them feel smarter. They added: they feel smart and cool; feel cool, up to date. Most of the participants of FG3 also agreed and added that use of Arabizi make them feel: cool; trendy. On the other

hand, the majority of the participants in the FG2 disagreed with the notion. The focus groups expressed their views on whether Arabizi negatively affects its users' proficiency in Arabic language. All participants in FG1 concurred that the use of Arabizi adversely affect users' proficiency in the Arabic language because; mess up grammar, and make spelling mistakes; Arabizi weakens Arabic language. The FG2 expressed similar sentiments and said: people will forget Arabic and use English. And the FG3 stated that: improper language replaces a proper language.

All the participants agreed that Arabizi threatens the existence of Arabic language. The participants in the FG1: said: Arabic is under threat; schools focus on English. The FG2 concurred: because youth is using it; Arabic will get weaker. And the FG3 added: Arabizi is popular; people will forget Arabic. The majority of the participants agreed that the use of Arabizi is related to the difficulty people face when writing/reading Arabic. The FG1 said: most students do not know how to read and write Arabic; people are used to typing English. The FG2 concurred. One of its participants said: I use Arabizi even when I write notes for myself. Yet, the majority of the FG3 disagreed, save one participant. That participant said: it's hard to read and write Arabic.

All the participants agreed that the use of Arabizi is related to the use of new communication technologies (smart phones), which do not help in communicating in Arabic. The participants in the FG1 agreed, and referred to social media as a case in point. The participants in the FG2 agreed and said the QWERTY key makes typing in Arabic difficult. Also the majority in the FG3 stated that Arabizi is easier to type on smartphones and chatting.

Discussion

The participants in the focus groups provided valuable information and important insights about their perception and use of Arabizi. Young Arab use Arabizi because it was "difficult to express one's self in Arabic", and English is "modern", "sign of prestige", and that they feel "cool", "smart", and "trendy". Previous research has referred to this phenomenon of devaluing the local language and overvaluing the English language (Robertson, 2007; Talhouk, 2010; Rouchdy, 2011). The findings also put the blame on the parents who did not speak Arabic at home.

The findings give credence to previous research that the use of English in private schools is to blame for the rise of Arabizi, and the deterioration of the Arabic language (Sadek, 2007; Ibrahim & Makhlof, 2008; Ghanem, 2010). The findings also support previous research suggesting that Arabizi threatens the Arabic language and Arab identity (Crystal, 1997). Thus, the Arabic language is encountering attrition rather than facing language death (Gulida, 2010; Dorian, 2010). The Arabic language will continue to survive because it's the language of the Holy Quran. The findings support the assertion that "youth speech" and "the emergence of 'youth' social category associated with mobile phones, leisure, music commercials...represent the quintessence of a new globalized category" (Miller & Caubet, 2010, p. 248). On social media for a many Arabs use the slang English instead of Arabic because it is easier and faster to type, and the slang English to exchange information and news (Riz, 2012).

Conclusion

The challenge facing young Arabs is that they do not have enough confidence and trust in their own language, and consequently, in their identity, and self. It's very unfortunate that many Arab children have been raised and informed that in order to succeed in life they have to learn the English language, rather than the Arabic language. Arab educational systems, Arab mass media, as well as, Arab parents have to blame. Arab children are given a Western education to make them more employable, without preparing them to withstand a foreign cultural encounter. In the long run, this process will indirectly inflict damage to the Arab value system, and the symbol of Arab identity, the Arabic language.

This study used focus groups composed of non-random participants. This limitation makes it impossible to draw conclusion from this study to the general population. Another limitation is that the focus groups are drawn from a private university. Moreover, the study took place in an Arab country where the numbers of the Arabs are far less the numbers of non-Arabs. Future research should aim collecting information on the perception and use of Arabizi from random samples from public as well as private universities representing different strata of young Arabs.

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