Arabizi: An exploration of the use of the contemporary youth netspeak on Social Networking Sites in Saudi Arabia

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ABSTRACT

With the emergence of social networking sites, young people in the Arab world have started using a new electronic language called “Arabizi”. Arabizi, which has dominated the internet sites, is the process of using Roman letters and numbers to write Arabic words so it replaces the Arabic script. This new linguistic code has received strong criticism from Arabic language scholars who claim that its use is detrimental to the Arabic language and the maintenance of Arab identity. However, Arabizi use has continued to rise especially amongst Saudi Arabian youth. Despite the numerous criticisms and discussions about the disadvantages of using Arabizi, limited research exists on the reasons behind its use. Adopting a sociolinguistic and a discourse analytic approach, the present study investigated the attitudes of young Saudi Arabians, aged between 16 and 28 years of age, towards the use Arabizi on SNSs, and specifically Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, the reasons for its use and the functions Arabizi performs on social media.

The study employed a netnographic approach which included a mixed method design. Naturally occurring SNS data were collected from 55 Twitter, Facebook and Instagram users. Electronic questionnaires, distributed through open accounts on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and other SNSs, were completed by 131 users of Arabizi and 20 face to face interviews were undertaken. The data were collected from all over Saudi Arabia and interviews were conducted in the three major cities of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, Dammam and Jeddah. The quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The qualitative data obtained through the interviews and SNS were analysed using thematic analysis and discourse analysis respectively.

The questionnaire and interview results confirmed that Saudi youth use Arabizi for several different reasons, namely, (1) it is a habit, (2) it is a cool and stylish script, (3) it serves their curiosity to try

the new things others in their peer group are using, (4) it helps overcome difficulties with the Arabic language, and most importantly, (5) it is a language of secrecy that allows its users free expression and communication with peers – it allows them to escape from the judgements of older people. The participants also highlighted the Arabic and Arabizi codes serve different purposes and that addressee, topic and context play a significant role in deciding which code is to be used. The study suggests that of Arabizi has a strong social function and assists participants with development of social identity and solidarity.

The online data revealed that Saudi Arabian youth not only use Arabizi on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram but also code-switch between three different codes: Arabizi, Arabic and English. Arabizi and English are used predominantly in their interactions and server similar functions whereas the Arabic language has limited use. Arabizi and English are employed on social media to express emotions through complaining, swearing, cursing and flirting. Arabizi is also used to share the participants' updates and news, and to connect with other social media users while Arabic is limited to formal communication with employers and parents and for discussion of formal topics such as religion and politics.

By using discourse analysis to examine the phenomenon of Arabizi on social media, significant insights are provided into the way the code functions as a means of expressing identity, creating solidarity, and maintaining rapport among young people in Saudi Arabia. Given its importance, it is recommended that future research be undertaken on the use of Arabizi.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT …… i

FORM B: CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THESIS …….…… iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ……..…….……...…… v

TABLE OF CONTENTS ……...…..…… vii

LIST OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS …….……. xvii

LIST OF TABLES ……...……...…….…… xix

LIST OF CHARTS …….…….…….…… xxi

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS ……..……..…….…. xxiii

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION……1

1.1 Introduction 1

1.2 The Arabizi phenomenon: What is it and where is it used? 2

1.3 The current situation of Arabizi in Saudi Arabia 6

1.4 Overview of research on Arabizi in the Middle East 8

1.5 Justification of the study 10

1.6 Research aims and research questions 11

1.7 Contribution of the study 12

1.8 Research methodology 14

1.9 Structure of the thesis 16

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW……21

2.1 Introduction……..21

2.2 Arabic orthography reform: A historical background 21
2.2.1 Romanisation of the Arabic script in Arab countries……23
2.2.2 Romanisation of the Arabic script in non-Arab countries……28
2.2.2.1 Romanisation of the Arabic script in Malaysia……..29
2.2.2.2 Romanisation of the Arabic script in Turkey……31
2.3 Arabic Language on the Internet……..32
2.3.1 Language and the Internet……33
2.3.2 Social media and young people……36
2.3.3 The emergence of Arabizi: The new Arabic Internet speak……..38
2.4 The use of Arabizi on SNSs……..41
2.4.1 The stylistic features of Arabizi……42
2.4.2 Attitudes towards and beliefs about the use of Arabizi……..43
2.4.2.1 The importance of studying attitudes and beliefs about language……..44
2.4.2.2 Research on attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi……47
2.4.2.3 The social attitude towards Arabizi and its users……51
2.4.3 Reasons for using Arabizi……..54
2.4.3.1 In Egypt……...55
2.4.3.2 In Lebanon……...57
2.4.3.3 In Kuwait……58
2.4.3.4 In UAE……61
2.4.3.5 In Saudi Arabia……...63
2.5 Diglossia and code-switching in Arabic language……67
2.5.1 Diglossia……68
2.5.2 Overview of code-switching……..70
2.5.3 Reasons for code-switching……72

2.5.4 Research on the code-switching of Arabic speakers……..74

2.6 Conclusion…….82

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY…….85

3.1 Introduction……...85

3.2 Theoretical framework……..85

3.2.1 Epistemology: Social constructivist theory……86

3.2.2 Methodology: Ethnography of Communication (EoC)……..88

3.2.2.1 Netnography……90

3.3 Data collection instruments……...92

3.3.1 Mixed methods design: embedded design……..92

3.3.2 Naturally occurring interactions…….97

3.3.2.1 Why Twitter, Facebook and Instagram?.....98

3.3.2.2 Twitter…….100

3.3.2.3 Facebook…….101

3.3.2.4 Instagram……102

3.3.3 E-questionnaires……103

3.3.4 Interviews……105

3.4 Description of research participants and sampling process……107

3.4.1 Criterion-based sampling and Snowball sampling……..107

3.4.2 Research participants and research sites……..110

3.4.2 Twitter, Facebook and Instagram participants…….112

3.4.2.1 Demographics of respondents from Twitter, Facebook and Instagram……112

3.4.3 Participants and demographics of respondents for the e-questionnaire……...117

3.4.4 Interview participants…….119

3.4.4.1 Demographics of respondents from the interviews…….119
3.5 Data collection……...122
3.5.1 Pilot run of e-questionnaires and interviews……...122
3.5.2 Naturally occurring interactions……..125
3.5.2.1 Twitter……..125
3.5.2.2 Facebook……..126
3.5.2.3 Instagram……..126
3.5.3 E-questionnaires……..127
3.5.4 Interviews……128
3.5.4.1 Challenges during the interviews……129
3.6 Data management and analysis……...……...131
3.6.1 Data management……...….131
3.6.2 Data analysis……133
3.6.2.1 Analysis of naturally occurring data…….133
3.6.2.2 Analysis of e-questionnaires…….138
3.6.2.3 Analysis of interviews……..138
3.6.3 Reflexivity, reliability and validity……..140
3.6.3.1 Reflexivity…….140
3.6.3.2 Reliability and validity……..142
3.7 Ethical considerations…….146
3.7.1 Why ethics is important.....146
3.7.2 Ethics in online research…….146
3.7.3 Anonymity and confidentiality……148
3.7.4 Participant and parental consent……..149
3.8 Conclusion……..151

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGD BASED ON QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEWS…….153

4.1 Introduction……153

4.2 Results from the e-questionnaires……..154

4.2.1 The use of Arabizi……...154

4.2.2 Reasons for using Arabizi……...157

4.2.3 Attitudes and beliefs towards Arabizi…….163

4.2.4 Code-switching between Arabizi, Arabic and English……...170

4.2.5 The social attitude towards Arabizi……176

4.2.6 Timeframe for the use of Arabizi……...178

4.2.7 Summary of the e-questionnaire results…….183

4.3 Results from the interviews……...184

4.3.1 The use of Arabizi……..185

4.3.2 Motivations for using Arabizi……192

4.3.2.1 Initial reasons for the use of Arabizi……192

4.3.2.2 Current reasons for the use of Arabizi……196

4.3.3 Code-switching between Arabizi, Arabic and English……...202

4.3.5 Attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi……208

4.3.6 The social attitude towards Arabizi……222

4.3.7 Timeframe for their use of Arabizi…….229

4.4 Data integration and conclusion……...232

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS BASED ON DISCOURSE DATA……237

5.1 Introduction 237

5.2 General findings on the use of Arabizi on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram 237

5.3 Functions of Arabizi.....242
5.3.1 Complaining……243
5.3.1.1 Twitter……..243
5.3.1.2 Facebook……...247
5.3.1.3 Instagram……..248
5.3.2 Swearing/cursing……249
5.3.2.1 Twitter……..251
5.3.2.2 Facebook……..256
5.3.2.3 Instagram……..257
5.3.3 Criticism/sarcasm……259
5.3.3.1 Twitter……..259
5.3.3.2 Facebook……..266
5.3.3.3 Instagram……267
5.3.4 Flirting……269
5.3.4.1 Twitter……270
5.3.4.2 Facebook……274
5.3.4.3 Instagram……275
5.3.5 Quoting songs……277
5.3.5.1 Twitter……..278
5.3.5.2 Facebook……..279
5.3.5.3 Instagram……281
5.3.6 Sharing daily experiences ……..282
5.3.6.1 Twitter……..282
5.3.6.2 Facebook……...284
5.3.7 Inserting religious terms……...285

5.3.7.1 Twitter……...286
5.3.7.2 Facebook……...287
5.3.7.3 Instagram……...288
5.3.8 Conveying cultural specific meaning……...289
5.3.9 Indicating change of situational features (participants, topics) ……...292
5.4 Functions of English…….297
5.4.1 Complaining……...298
5.4.1.1 Twitter…….299
5.4.1.2 Facebook…….301
5.4.2 Swearing/cursing……303
5.4.2.1 Twitter…….303
5.4.2.2 Facebook…….306
5.4.2.3 Instagram…….307
5.4.3 Criticism/sarcasm……...309
5.4.4 Flirting……310
5.4.5 Giving compliments……311
5.4.6 Indicating precision of meaning (abbreviations, technical terms) …….313
5.4.7 Inserting English idioms/expressions…….315
5.5 Functions of Arabic (script) ……..317
5.5.1 Conveying cultural specific meaning……..317
5.5.1.1 Twitter……..317
5.5.1.2 Facebook……..320
5.5.2 Inserting religious terms…….322
5.5.2.1 Twitter…….322
5.5.2.2 Facebook…….324

5.5.2.3 Instagram……..326
5.5.3 Indicating change of situational features (participants, topics) ……..327
5.5.3.1 Twitter……..327
5.5.3.2 Facebook……..328
5.5.3.3 Instagram…….331
5.5.4 Quoting songs and poems……332
5.6 Conclusion…….334

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS…….337
6.1 Introduction 337
6.2 RQ1: Attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi 338
6.3 RQ2: Motivations for using Arabizi..... 349
6.4 RQ3: Functions of Arabizi on SNSs 359
6.4.1 Expressing anger and frustration…….……360
6.4.2 Expressing affection and endearment…….……363
6.4.3 Sharing personal updates……366
6.4.4 Indicating precision of meaning…….368
6.5 RQ4: Code-switching between Arabizi, Arabic and English..... 371
6.5.1 Functions of English……376
6.5.2 Functions of Arabic (script) ……383
6.6 Conclusion..... 388

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION…….393
7.1 Introduction 393
7.2 Summary of the research aims and methodology 393
7.3 Summary of major findings..... 396

7.4 Implications of findings 405

7.4.1 Society……405

7.4.2 Media……...406

7.4.3 Education……407

7.5 Limitations of the study……..408

7.6 Recommendations for future research……409

7.7 Conclusion…… 403

LIST OF INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

1. Applied Linguistics Association of Australia (ALAA), Learning in a Multilingual World Conference, Adelaide, Australia, 30 November – 2 December, 2015

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Demographic information of female respondents from Twitter

Table 3.2 Demographic information of male respondents from Twitter

Table 3.3 Demographic information of female respondents from Facebook

Table 3.4 Demographic information of male respondents from Facebook

Table 3.5 Demographic information of female respondents from Instagram

Table 3.6 Demographic information of male respondents from Instagram

Table 3.7 E-questionnaire respondents' age information

Table 3.8 E-questionnaire respondents' place of residence

Table 3.9 Demographic information of respondents from the interviews (both genders)

Table 3.10 Ethical Guidelines for Researching Internet Communities *(Flicker et al., 2004)*

Table 4.1 Sites where Arabizi is used by e-questionnaire respondents

Table 4.2 Other places where Arabizi is used by e-questionnaire respondents

Table 4.3 Principal reasons for using Arabizi by e-questionnaire respondents

Table 4.4 Other reasons for using Arabizi by e-questionnaire respondents

Table 4.5 The e-questionnaire respondents' attitudes and beliefs towards Arabizi

Table 4.6 Additional reasons for using Arabizi: whether or not it represents its users

Table 4.7 The uses of Arabizi, Arabic and English by the e-questionnaire respondents

Table 4.8 Why e-questionnaire respondents will/will not continue using Arabizi

Table 4.9 The timeframe for the e-questionnaire respondents' use of Arabizi

Table 4.10 Information about time and site of the start of Arabizi use by interviewees

Table 4.11 SNSs where the interviewees use Arabizi

Table 4.12 Reasons for not using Arabizi on SNSs by the interviewees

Table 4.13 The initial reasons for using Arabizi by the interviewees

Table 4.14 The current reasons for using Arabizi by the interviewees

Table 4.15 The uses of Arabizi, Arabic and English by the interviewees

Table 4.16 The reasons for code-switching between Arabizi, Arabic and English by the interviewees

Table 4.17 The interviewees' attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi

Table 4.18 The reasons why Arabizi is easier to use than Arabic

Table 4.19 The reasons why Arabizi could not replace the Arabic script

Table 4.20 Opinions about the negative social attitude towards Arabizi

Table 4.21 The expected timeframe for the interviewees' use of Arabizi

Table 4.22 The attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi based on the e-questionnaire and the interview results

Table 4.23 The reasons for using Arabizi based on the e-questionnaires and the interviews results

Table 4.24 The uses of Arabic, Arabizi and English by the e-questionnaire respondents and the interviewees

Table 4.25 The timeframe for using Arabizi based on the e-questionnaires and the interviews results

Table 6.1 The attitudes and beliefs about Arabizi based on the e-questionnaire and the interview results

Table 6.2 The reasons for using Arabizi based on the e-questionnaires and the interviews results

LIST OF CHARTS

Chart 4.1 The e-questionnaire respondents' answer to the question "Does Arabizi represent part or all of who you are to the society?"

Chart 4.2 The codes employed by Arabizi users on Internet sites

Chart 4.3 Additional reasons for the use of Arabic, Arabizi and English

Chart 4.4 Social attitudes towards Arabizi

Chart 4.5 Responses to the question "Do you intend to continue using Arabizi or not?"

Chart 4.6 Interviewees' responses to "Do you use Arabizi beyond SNSs?"

Chart 4.7 Answers to whether Arabizi is/is not easier than Arabic

Chart 4.8 Response to "Could Arabizi replace the Arabic script?"

Chart 4.9 Answers to the question "Who are the strongest critics of Arabizi?"

Chart 4.10 Answers to the question "Do you agree with the social stereotypes about Arabizi users?"

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EoC – Ethnography of Communication

SNSs – Social Networking Sites

DA – Discourse analysis

CMC – Computer-Mediated Communication

CI – Confidence Interval

RQ – Research question

BBM – Blackberry Messenger

MSN – Microsoft Messenger

L1 – First language

L2 – Second language