

## **Language and Identity in Social Net Working Sites**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines one of the most significant Web tools, Social Networking Sites (SNS), and focuses on Facebook, an example of an online community specifically aimed at encouraging communication between young people and how social media is affecting the identities and language of young people in Jordan. The particular aspects to explore in this study are: the online written languages, Facebook's new concepts, and Facebook's impact on language and identity. Two interesting findings have emerged from this study: first, that English is the dominant language used online among a particular group of undergraduate students of Internet users in Jordan, and secondly, that a previously little used written form of Romanized Jordanian Arabic is also widely used in informal communication by this group. However; the participants in this study made quite clear that their use of English does not signify an embrace of Western culture or an abandonment of Jordanian identity. In the light of these findings, it is worthwhile to conduct more research in order to consider whether the online use of English and Jordanian Arabic might reflect broader and more enduring social and linguistic shifts.*

**Key Words:** Identity, Social Networking, Face Book, Language Learning, Sites.

### ***Introduction and Background***

Languages are ways of expressing and recognising the many social identities people have. They are both acquired naturally and taught formally and both natural acquisition and formal teaching create, strengthen or weaken the links between languages and identities. An important language identity link is the one between 'national language' and 'national identity'. This link may be created, strengthened or weakened by formal teaching in schools, especially in language as subject. People acquire new identities and new languages or language varieties throughout life; it is a dynamic process (Takahashi, 2000). If young people become conscious of this process, they can play with their languages and identities, shifting from one language to another within the same conversation, signalling a change from one identity to another. Young people have been shown to be adept at this as they move from one social situation to another becoming consciously plurilingual.

As a major new means of global communication, the Internet is bound to have a great impact on language use. The Internet would encourage global use of English to such a degree that other languages would be crowded out (Crystal, 2001). And indeed, in the mid-1990s, fully 80% of international Web sites were reported to be in English (Cyberspeech, 1997). Concerns about English use online have sparked new efforts to improve English language instruction in many countries (Takahashi, 2000). The Internet has also proven to be a vehicle for written communication in dialects and languages that previously were used principally for oral communication (Warschauer, 2001). The current study aims to examine one of the most significant Internet tools, Social Networking Sites (SNS), and focuses on Facebook, an example of an online community specifically aimed at encouraging communication between young people and how social media is changing the identities and languages of young people in Jordan. The particular aspects to explore in this study are: the online written languages, Facebook's new concepts, and its impact on language learning and identity.

### **What are Social Networking Sites?**

Ellison (2007) mentioned that Social Networking Sites as a new phenomenon are web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Facebook, for instance, provides a sophisticated profiling system that allows users to create detailed information about themselves and also fine tune the level of privacy by determining what information is to be made public. Profiles typically involve sharing a photograph of the user and consist of such information as age, location, personal interests and added details in an 'About me' section.

Once a profile is created, users are then regarded as a member of the online community, and can create a list of friends that will form the basis of their social network. This process is achieved in two ways. Firstly, users establish lists of friends by sending a request to a potential new member until the user accepts or declines the invitation (McCarty 2009). Secondly, the majority of SNSs also have group or community functions, which allow users to create groups within the SNS based on a particular theme. In Facebook, there are literally thousands of such groups, and these can be found using sophisticated keyword searches. Users can then join these groups, which may or may not be moderated by the creator, and receive information from other users within the group. This may in turn lead users to become friends as a result of attending group meetings.

### **Social Networking and Language Learning**

One of the main concerns with SNSs is how computers can transform the way people learn languages using socially oriented software. Facebook is an example of learning in a social environment, where people are interacting with other, looking at what kinds of interactions are taking place and what they mean in terms of language learning. Feuerstein (2003) stressed that mediation is fundamental to all human development including learning. Successful learning is seen as being dependent on how learners interact with the people around them in order to overcome problems they cannot solve by themselves, so that they can move to the next stage of development. The role of the significant other or mediator (also referred to as the 'more knowledgeable other' or MKO) is to attempt to find ways of helping the other person to learn. While Vygotsky noted the centrality of language as an essential tool used by humans to carry out mediation, Feuerstein (2003) emphasized the fundamental role of mediators in the transmission of culture. In this way we can see that the concept of mediation provides us with a means to examine the roles of both language and culture in human development.

### **Languages used in Jordan**

In Jordan, two varieties of Arabic language are used rather than different languages. The two varieties used in Jordan are Classical Arabic and Jordanian Arabic. Classical Arabic is the literary dialect which is used in the Qur'an; in most print publications including books, magazines, and newspapers; and in formal spoken discourse, including prayer, television news broadcasts, and formal prepared speeches. Jordanian Arabic is the spoken dialect of the Jordanian people and is used in conversation, songs, films, and television advertisements. As for written forms, it is used in comic strips, messages, and occasionally, in novels and short stories. Both Classical Arabic and Jordanian Arabic use the same Arabic script. Jordanian Arabic is spoken only in Jordan (or by Jordanians elsewhere), but it is understood widely in the Arab world. Both Classical Arabic and Jordanian Arabic have their own powerful symbolism for Jordanians. Classical Arabic, as the language of the Qur'an and the common language of the Arab nation, is central to their identity as members of that nation and of the broader Islamic community. Jordanian Arabic, as the language of daily communication, jokes, song, and cinema, is central to their identity as Jordanians. Beyond this diglossia of Classical and Jordanian Arabic, English plays a dual role in Jordan. On the one hand it is the principle foreign language of the general population.

English is the first and only mandatory foreign language taught in schools, with obligatory English language instruction starting in first grade and private kindergarten. Hotel workers, shopkeepers, and street salespeople use English to communicate with foreign visitors and residents, especially in major cities and tourist destinations (Schaub, 2000; Stevens, 1994). Beyond that though, English starts to serve as a second language of additional communication for a large swath of Jordanian's elite. The majority of private schools are considered English language schools, which means that English language instruction begins in kindergarten and that English is a medium of instruction of other specified subjects (i.e., mathematics and science). Recently, the Ministry of Education has started to teach English from the first grade within the public school system. The elite usually continue their post-secondary education in English, studying either abroad (e.g., in the United States or England).

Medicine, dentistry, veterinary studies, engineering, the natural sciences, and computer sciences in the Jordanian universities, all use English as a main medium of instruction, and other disciplines, such as commerce and law, have special English-medium sections which are considered more prestigious and difficult to enter. Graduates from these universities and programs often enter careers in which English continues to be used as a daily medium of communication, such as international business or computer science. Professionals in other elite fields, such as medicine, continue to use English as an additional language through frequent contact with foreigners and through professional activities. Conferences of doctors, dentists, and nurses in Jordan are conducted in English, even without foreigners present, and professional publications of these groups are published in English.

Finally, the language used online among Jordanians, while chatting and socially networking, varied between Arabic and English. They used modern online English (numbers involved with letters, for example: B4, 2day... etc) and 'modern online Arabic' (what is known as the Anglo-Arab, for ex. 'Wa7sh,7abebe....3la 3ene....') which have developed on Facebook. This Anglo-Arab language comprises the Arabic words written in English letters with numbers referring to certain Arabic letters.

### **Method**

#### **Subjects**

The study was carried out among 44 undergraduate students in the universities of Jordan known to be Internet users. The category of "undergraduate students" was chosen because it represents the generation of Internet users in Jordan. The undergraduate students in this study were selected through personal contacts; the subjects may not be representative of all undergraduate students in Jordan. "Undergraduate Students" were defined for the purpose of the study as people between the ages of 18 and 24 engaged in Jordanian universities. The sample was fairly evenly balanced for gender, with 23 boys and 21 girls. Almost all had part of their education in English and part in Arabic.

#### **Instrument**

A written survey was developed that inquired about people's language online. The survey included eight questions about language use online (e.g., what language[s] do you use in online chatting with Jordanians or other Arabic speakers). The survey was first pilot tested among a small group of people who were not in the final survey, and then finalized and distributed by e-mail to 44 people. Recipients were also asked to include voluntarily examples of any e-mail messages or online chats that illustrated the points covered in the survey.

#### **Data Analysis**

Survey data was analyzed to allow the examination of various types of online communication by language, dialect, and script and why the participants used a particular language, dialect, and script online. In addition, after the use of Jordanian Arabic was identified as occurring in online communication, a two-tailed Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to investigate which factors were correlated with online use of Jordanian Arabic (with alpha established at .05).

#### **Limitations**

It is important to point out the limitations of this study. The sample size is small and was selected through personal contacts of the researcher, and is thus non-random. In addition, no systematic attempt was made to assess participants' fluency in English, Classical Arabic, or Jordanian Arabic. For these reasons, the results of the study cannot be assumed to be generalizable to other populations beyond this group of subjects. Rather, this study should be considered an exploratory investigation that had the goal of identifying possible issues and trends for further research.

#### **Results**

Classical Arabic in Arabic Script, the most common form of writing in Jordan, was seldom used by any of the 44 participants in their Facebook chatting. Rather, online communications featured a new and unusual diglossia-between a foreign language, English, and colloquial form of Arabic. Table (1) shows the Language used on Facebook online chat and numbers and percentages of language users.

**Table(1) Language Used on Facebook Online Chat and Numbers and Percentages of Language Users.**

<b>Languages used on Facebook Online Chat</b>	<b>Numbers and percentages of Language users</b>
English (Romanized Script)	20 (45.4%)
Classical Arabic (Arabic Script)	2 (4.5%)
Classical Arabic (Romanized Script)	3 (6.8%)
Jordanian Arabic (Arabic Script)	5 (11.3%)
Jordanian Arabic (Romanized Script)	14 (31.8%)
Total	44(100%)

Table 1 shows the number of people who indicated that they used English, Classical Arabic (in either Arabic script or Romanized script), and Jordanian Arabic (in either Arabic script or Romanized script) in their online chats. English and Romanized Jordanian Arabic are the two main language forms used and will be discussed in turn below.

Table 2 displays a simple comparison between English and any form of Arabic (or English and Arabic combined). Data indicate that English is the dominant language used in online communication among this group of Jordanian graduate students.

**Table 2 English vs. Arabic**

<b>Language</b>	<b>Online Chat</b>
English only	20 (45.4%)
Arabic* only	7 (15.8%)
English and Arabic*	17 (38.6%)
Total Number of Participants	44 (100%)

It is very obvious in Table 2 that the dominance of English is particularly strong in online chats (45.4%), the majority code-switch English and Arabic (38.6%) , with smaller percentage using Arabic only (15.8%). An examination of online chat transcripts that were submitted indicated that, when English and Arabic were combined in a single message, there tended to be more use of English. The survey data made it clear that the prominence of English in Internet communication stems from a variety of social, economic, and technological factors that are closely related to the more general role of English in Jordanian society.

### **Use of Jordanian Arabic**

The other interesting result of the study was the considerable amount of Romanized Jordanian Arabic used by the participants. Romanized Jordanian Arabic was widely used in Facebook online chatting, with many people engaging in code-switching (between English and Jordanian Arabic) and some writing exclusively in Jordanian Arabic. The emergence of Romanized Jordanian Arabic is especially interesting because it was previously not a widely used language form. As discussed earlier, Jordanian Arabic is principally a means of oral communication. Though it has been written in certain realms, such as comic books, prior to the Internet it appeared mainly in Arabic script, with several unofficial Romanized versions existing principally for the benefit of foreigners (for example, in language instruction books and dictionaries). Broader written uses of Jordanian Arabic in areas such as business, scholarship, and religion are frowned upon by society and by various educational and religious authorities. The use of Jordanian Arabic in online communications represents a major expansion of its written use, especially in a Romanized form, in a new realm in which informality is considered acceptable and in which no authority has stepped forward to discourage its use.

One of the interesting features of this adaptation is the widespread use of the numbers 2, 3, and 7 to represent phonemes in the Roman alphabet. The uses of these numbers arose among Internet users and have spread spontaneously and are now widely recognized. Participants in the study who engaged in code-switching indicated that they most frequently used Jordanian Arabic to express highly personal content that they can't express well in English. Several participants explained that they start off in English and switch over to Jordanian Arabic when they feel they need to. Analysis of sample chats indicated that, in bilingual messages, Jordanian Arabic was most often found in greetings, humorous or sarcastic expressions, expressions related to food and holidays, and religious expressions.

### **Discussion**

Two interesting findings have emerged from this study: first, that English is the dominant language used online among a particular group of undergraduate students of Internet users in Jordan , and secondly, that a previously little used written form of Romanized Jordanian Arabic is also widely used in informal communication by this group. The possible meaning of these findings is better understood when examined in a broader context of language, technology, and society in Jordan and internationally. Sociologists have pointed to the current era as marked by a contradiction between global networks and local identities (Barber, 1995; Castells, 1996/2000; Castells, 1997).

On the one hand, global flows of capital, finance, markets and media increasingly impinge on our lives, weakening traditional pillars of authority such as the nation-state, the permanent job, and the family (Castells, 1996/2000). On the other hand, this breakdown of traditional authority has caused a reaction as people attempt to defend their cultures and identity from an amorphous globalized control. Thus, people witness the increased power of transnational corporations, international media, and multilateral institutions such as the World Trade Organization and also witness the rise of religious fundamentalists, and identity movements. Within this matrix, language is a potential medium of both global networks and local identities (Warschauer, 2000a, 2000b). Economic and social globalization, pushed along by the rapid diffusion of the Internet, creates a strong demand for an international lingua franca, thus furthering English's presence as a global language (Crystal, 1997). On the other hand, the same dynamics that gave rise to globalization, and global English, also give rise to a backlash against both, and that gets expressed, in one form, through a strengthened attachment to local dialects and languages. This tension between Internet led globalization and an increased need for local culture and language has pushed Singaporeans to cling closely to their own highly colloquial dialect (Singlish) even as the government pushes them to adapt standard English in order to market their goods more effectively (Warschauer, 2001).

It has also given a push to movements in defense of other languages, such as French (Online, 1998). And the Internet can be a convenient medium for both sides of this dynamic. It is not only a medium for global interaction in English, but it also allows for new forms of communication and interaction in local languages. Eritreans living in Italy or the US can chat in their native language and read online newspapers. Hawaiians can produce curricular materials in their indigenous language that would have previously been unaffordable (Warschauer & Donaghy, 1997). And, as seen by the use of numbers to represent Arabic phonemes discussed above, new written forms of language can emerge. In this context, then it is not surprising to witness expanded use of both English and Arabic online among this group of Jordanians, that is, the instrumental use of a global language and the more intimate and personal use of a local one. What is interesting, though, and worthy of further analysis is how the main literacy language of Jordan, Classical Arabic, may be getting squeezed from both above and below by this dynamic.

The ties of the Arab elite to Classical Arabic are not particularly strong (Haeri, 1997). This stems, in her eyes, from a number of factors, including the elite's immersion in private, foreign language education; elite involvement in occupations demanding use of English (e.g., international banking, medicine, and research) or Jordanian Arabic (e.g., movie and stage acting) rather than Classical Arabic (e.g., government clerk positions). It has also been pointed out that the links between the poor and written Classical Arabic as a language of scholarship are weak, since the majority of the poor are illiterate (see discussion in Fandy, 2000). In this context, it is not unlikely that the advent of the Internet could be one factor, together with other socioeconomic changes (e.g., globalization), that contributes toward a shift from the traditional diglossia in Jordan to increased multilingualism, with both English (from "above") and Jordanian Arabic (from "below") encroaching on the traditional dominance of Classical Arabic in written communication.

If this was the case, it could be one expression of a strengthening of global (English-language dominant) networks in Jordan, as well as local (Jordanian) identities, with a corresponding weakening of more "traditional" sources of identity, such as (Arab) nationalism. The long-term consequences of such a trend, if it continues, is unclear. On the one hand, the participants in this study made quite clear that their use of English does not signify an embrace of Western culture or an abandonment of Jordanian identity. In contrast, they tended to describe their use of English in terms of Jordan's long and proud history of being able to absorb the best from a broad array of cultures and make it its own. And they also made clear that their own local language, Jordanian Arabic, is a particularly powerful vehicle for expressing their most personal thoughts and feelings. Their use of Jordanian Arabic online thus represents the appropriation of technology toward a people's own communicative purposes.

### ***Conclusion***

As an important new medium of human communication, the Internet is bound to have an important long-term effect on language use. It is too early to tell what that impact will be. The trends discussed in this paper could prove to be temporary, if, for example, the development and diffusion of Arabic language software and operating systems bolsters the use of Classical Arabic and stems the tide of online communication in English or in Romanized Arabic dialects. However, language use online, in Jordan and elsewhere, will be shaped not just by the technical capacities that technology enables, but also by the social systems that technology encompasses.

And, as Castells (1996; 1997) and others (Barber, 1995; Friedman, 1999) have pointed out, the major social dynamic shaping international media and communication in this age of information is the contradiction between global networks and local identities. In that light, it is worthwhile to consider whether the online use of English and Jordanian Arabic by this small group of Jordanian undergraduate students might reflect broader and more enduring social and linguistic shifts.

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