

Forms of Online Communication among Young People in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This research aims to explore forms of communication among young people in Saudi Arabia. The collected data is analysed and presented to show the language used online. With the introduction of technology, new forms of Arabic were created. Arabizi is the informal Arabic chat alphabet which became a popular phenomenon among younger generations. I would like to analyse how often it is used and what is the attitude of youth to this type of communication. This research is a sociolinguistic study of a group of 50 respondents from Saudi Arabia in the age between 16 and 38. The respondents were asked 10 questions about the language used during online communication. The analysis brings interesting conclusions not only regarding the communication itself, but also including very important issues, such as the national identity of young Saudis. In the past 20 years, languages experience modification due to the technological development. Does Arabic undergo a linguistic change affected by technological progress? What is the language used online in the biggest Arabic country? The collected data of respondents will also try to give an answer to the question how the applications such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, snapchat, WhatsApp or others affected the Arabic language. What are the attitudes of young people in Saudi Arabia toward Arabizi?

Keywords: Arabic language, language of young people, Saudi Arabian dialects, Arabizi, language change

Streszczenie

Formy komunikacji online wśród młodego pokolenia w Arabii Saudyjskiej

Celem referatu jest zbadanie form komunikacji wśród młodych ludzi w Arabii Saudyjskiej. Zebrane dane są analizowane i prezentowane w celu ukazania języka używanego w Internecie. Wraz z wprowadzeniem technologii powstały nowe formy języka arabskiego. Arabizi to nieformalny arabski alfabet używany w komunikatorach internetowych, który stał się popularnym zjawiskiem wśród młodszych pokoleń. Chciałabym przeanalizować, jak często jest on stosowany i jaki jest stosunek młodzieży do tego typu komunikacji. Socjolingwistyczne badanie przeprowadzono na grupie 50 respondentów z Arabii Saudyjskiej w wieku od 16 do 38 lat. Ankietowanym zadano 10 pytań dotyczących języka używanego podczas komunikacji w Internecie. Z analizy wynikają ciekawe wnioski nie tylko dotyczące komunikacji, ale także bardzo ważnej kwestii, jaką jest tożsamość narodowa młodych Saudyjczyków. W ciągu ostatnich

20 lat języki uległy modyfikacjom w wyniku rozwoju technologii. Czy język arabski ulega zmianom językowym pod wpływem postępu technologicznego? Jaki język jest używany w Internecie w największym kraju arabskim? Zebrane dane respondentów spróbują również odpowiedzieć na pytanie, jak aplikacje typu Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp czy inne wpłynęły na język arabski? Jak młodzi ludzie w Arabii Saudyjskiej traktują użycie Arabizi?

Słowa kluczowe: język arabski, język młodego pokolenia, dialekty Arabii Saudyjskiej, Arabizi, zmiany językowe

1. Introduction

Arabic is the official language of 22 countries and has two varieties: standard (high) and colloquial (low). The standard form is the language of books, education, print media and conferences. The colloquial form is used in informal situations as daily conversations and each Arab country has its own dialect and several sub-dialects. The use of each variety depends on each one's mastery of both the colloquial dialect and formal Arabic, but the global picture is that Arabic dialects as well as formal Arabic are changing all the time (Rosenhouse 2011: 51). According to Alkhamees, the sociolinguistic situation in Saudi Arabia, as in most Arabic speaking countries, is very complex, characterized by diglossia and dialectal diversity (2023: 4). In the last 20 years, the Arabic language was affected by the introduction of social media. People started to use new forms of communication online, which caused Arabic spelling errors, the use of foreign words (particularly English words) although Arabic equivalents do exist, in addition to the common use of Colloquial Arabic whether in the Arabic or Romanized script (Al-Jarf 2019: 4). With the introduction of text messages and later on the social media applications, native Arabic language users have started to use a new way of exchanging information. Technology has fundamentally influenced both the quality and quantity of written communication (Singh and Alwaqaa 2023: 153).

The Arabic language, like the rest of the international languages, could not avoid being affected by what is going on around it in the era of digital technology. It was evident in the language of messaging, communication and media through the means available, especially among young people, that the language has changed at their hands and lost its original features, to the extent that Arabic and Western terms have been mixed and the vernacular has spread in which the language lost its essence and luster (Rashid 2020: 358).

There were many proposals to replace Arabic script with something easier to assimilate. The first noted attempt was by Wilhelm Spitta in 1880 in his book *Vulgardialectes von Agypten Grammatik des Arabischen*, in which he suggested using Latin characters to write the Egyptian

Arabic slang, instead of classical Arabic (Yaghan 2008: 41). Other proposals to adopt the standardized written version of Arabic were made by Vollers in 1890 and Willmore in 1901. Abdul Aziz Fahmi¹ proposed a full practical implementation scheme in 1943. At the time, the idea to write Arabic with Latin letters was resisted and severely criticized by Arab nationalists and Muslim enthusiasts, who considered it as a direct attack on the Arabic identity (Yaghan 2008: 41). The new code received intense criticism from Arabic linguists who argued that Arabizi is detrimental to the Arabic language and Arab identity (Alghamdi and Petraki 2018: 1). The previous analysis of the use of Arabizi in Saudi Arabia was undertaken by Alghamdi and Petraki (2018) and Alsulami (2019). Today due to the global use of English, especially after the improvement of online communicators, the use of Latin script became more common. This present survey aims to explore unique forms of communication among young people in Saudi Arabia. The choice of this particular Arabic country was not accidental. This is the largest Arab country, which achieved tremendous progress in recent years. Its rich history and culture, especially in the field of religion, plays a significant role in Saudi Arabia, that is why I focused on this highly conservative and religious society. Saudi Arabia is also a unique sociocultural context, differing from other Middle Eastern countries where Arabizi has been studied. Saudi society has been undergoing rapid developments recently, with the young generation being a strong cultural and economic power (Alghamdi and Petraki 2018: 4).

2. Arabizi – a new form of communication

During the 90s, non-Latin scripts were not supported on technological devices, thus Arabic language speakers were forced to use English or Latin script to write chats or short messages (Allehaiby 2013: 53). Arabizi or Arabglizi is an encoding system that uses the Romanized text and numbers instead of Arabic letters. The numerals compensate for Arabic phonemes that do not exist in the English language, but resemble Arabic letters and their shapes (Allehaiby 2013: 53). Arabic phonemes are transcribed by numbers like 3 for (voiced pharyngeal fricative) ع , 5 for (voiceless velar fricative) خ, 6 for (voiceless velarized dento-alveolar) ط, 7 for (devoiced pharyngeal fricative) ح, 8 for (voiceless uvular stop) ق. Vowels are seen as optional and in some cases can be omitted to rely on the speakers background knowledge and the fact that Arabizi is highly dependent on context and mostly used in informal situations (Yaghan 2008: 42). In

¹ He suggested to implement Romanization that would leave the words familiar to Egyptians. His attempts failed as the Egyptian dialect speakers felt an intense cultural connection to the Arabic alphabet, particularly the older generation.

addition, Arab Facebook users completely ignore the Arabic language spelling rules and use pronunciation in their own dialects. The same word or phrase, in the same dialect, is spelled differently by different users and two different words are sometimes spelled the same (Al-Jarf 2019: 7). The Arabizi system differs in every Arabic country, depending on the local dialect (Yanghan 2008: 42).

The following examples of Arabizi come from different surveys. The first one is from the research on language used in Facebook comments by Al-Jarf (2019), where she analysed the online language of young people from Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia and Jordan. 64% of the posts and comments by educated Arab adult Facebook users were written in informal language. 24% of the comments were written in Arabizi mixed with English:

(2) *allah y5aleli yakiii w ma y7rmi mnkkk ya A3 'la 7da b 7yatiii ❤️.. Jad 7yati bdunk ma b3tbrha 7yah... U're always there for me. U're the mom everyone wishes to have but thanks god u're mine 🙌😊❤️. Happy Mother's Day*

(Al-Jarf 2019: 6)

The above example presents the use of Arabizi and English in one message. The Arabic text is written in Arabizi and it cannot be written in the official form, since the dialectal forms are informal and hard to be transliterated. The English translation of the Arabizi passage is the following: “I am asking God to save you for me and not take you from me, the biggest treasure of my life...I would not consider my life without you...”. The motivation of switching codes from English to Arabic is dictated by emotional affection, since the Arabic language has a richer repertoire of expressions of feelings.

Another survey shows that code-switching between Arabic and English or Arabizi occurs while quoting what someone has said. For example:

(3) A: الأخت الفاضلة...الرجاء إحضار كتاب صقر معك غدا [literally (virtuous sister), please bring Saqir's book with you tomorrow]

B: 😊 this z the 1st time someone calls me “AL2O5T ALFADILAH”...😊 lol. Anyway, don't worry, I wont 4get 2 bring the book 2mr. Take care.

(Al-Khatib and Sabbah 2008: 53)

According to Alghamdi and Petraki (2018: 1), Arabizi use has been increasing, especially in Saudi Arabia. The findings of their research suggest participants use Arabizi because (1) it is the language of their peers, (2) it is cool and stylish, (3) they have difficulties with the Arabic language, and (4) Arabizi is a strong marker of Arab youth identity and group solidarity.

My study shows different results and attitudes of the young generation in Saudi Arabia. Although the survey from 2018 by Alghamdi and Petraki shows large interest in Arabizi, my survey from 2023 presents mostly negative opinions on its use and rejection. Nowadays even the youth prefer the Arabic language as the main language of online communication.

3. Methodology

In the study, I gathered data from anonymous participants via an online Forms questionnaire². The questions were in English and included multiple choice questions, checkboxes or short answers. This present research is a case study of a group of 50 nationals of Saudi Arabia at the age of 16-38, of which 58,3% were female and 41,7% male. I focused on the young generation community, because this group is familiar with new forms of online communication. According to Singh (2023: 158), the role of educational technology differs between school pupils and university students³. My survey focuses on university level students and was conducted in the end of 2023. The respondents also claim English is their second language. The first question regarded general communication through social media. Although the more than one answer to the question was permitted, the majority of respondents claim to use Arabic script in messages when contacting their friends online. The use of English text messages was a choice almost as common as Arabic voice messages, while English voice messages are produced by 37,5% of the respondents. The least common language in online communication by youth in Saudi Arabia is Arabizi (see Fig. 1). The nomenclature constituted a problem though, because the majority of respondents were not familiar with the word 'Arabizi'. The research results (see below) indicated that they knew the version of the script, but they did not necessarily know what the name of the script was.

²The survey used a Google Forms application and contained ten different questions about online language use (it is included in the Appendix).

³ This is the reason why my paper focuses only on people between 16 and 38 (university students).

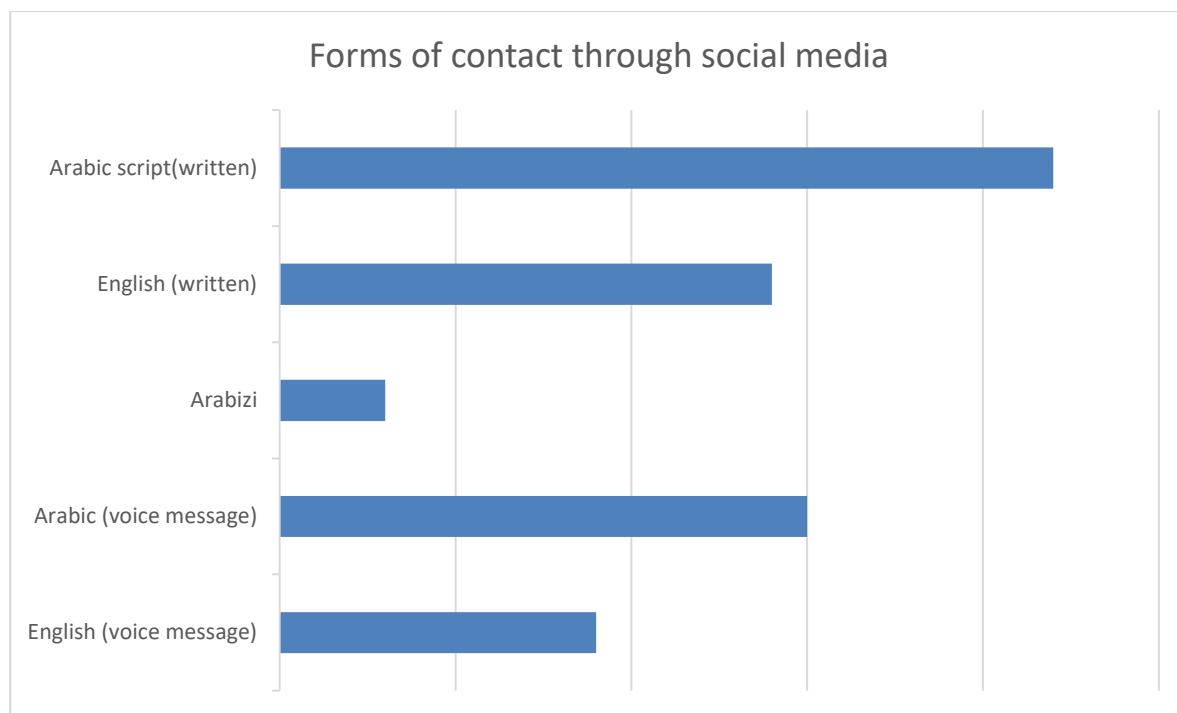


Figure 1. Answers to the question “What language do you use to contact your friends by social media (Messenger/WhatsApp/SMS etc.)”

4. Data analysis on the online communication of youth in Saudi Arabia

There are many researches about Arabizi, since this is the phenomenon which has emerged after the start of online technology era and online communicators. The globalization of English-based technology has caused the present-day Arab generation to rely on the use of Latin script as the main writing system when communicating through the electronic medium (Allehaiby 2013: 60). It was indicated by many researchers⁴ that in Arabic countries like Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Jordan the use of Arabizi is much more common than in Saudi Arabia. My research will try to give an answer to the question why the young generation in Saudi Arabia do not use Arabizi that often. It was indicated in previous researches that young people use Arabizi because it is considered prestigious or more westernized, and they want to show off. They use Arabizi because it is easier than writing pure Arabic, it is considered nowadays as a life-style and it is used commonly by their colleagues. One of the main reasons are technical issues, which is the lack of Arabic keyboard⁵ (Alsulami 2019: 262). Some of the respondents from the above

⁴See also: Al-Khatib, Sabbah(2008), Chader et al.(2019), Khaled(2019), Abu-Liel, Eviatar, Nir(2020), Badia, Benslimane (2021), Bardaweel, Rababah(2021), Hajir, Rasman, McInerney(2022), Raïdy, Harmaniani(2023).

⁵ This was the main problem in the beginning, when it was not possible to use the Arabic script in cell phones, which was the origin of Arabizi.

mentioned Arabic countries claim they use Arabizi because they do not like Arabic and/or because of poor knowledge of Arabic. This paper will try address the issues below:

- Why and how Arabizi is used?
- What are the attitudes towards the use of Arabizi
- What are advantages and disadvantages of using Arabizi
- Who are the users of Arabizi?

In addition, this survey will present examples of language in social media among Saudi youngsters.

Young Saudis are familiar with the online version of Arabic, but they do not necessarily know the terminology. It turns out that the term ‘Arabizi⁶’ itself is not sufficiently known even among young people. Only 62,5% of the respondents know what Arabizi is or have heard about it (2%). The rest do not recognize this term (36%). After asking a more specific question, using an example of a random sentence written in Arabizi, the recognition was more common: 79,2% yes , 20,8% no (Fig. 2).

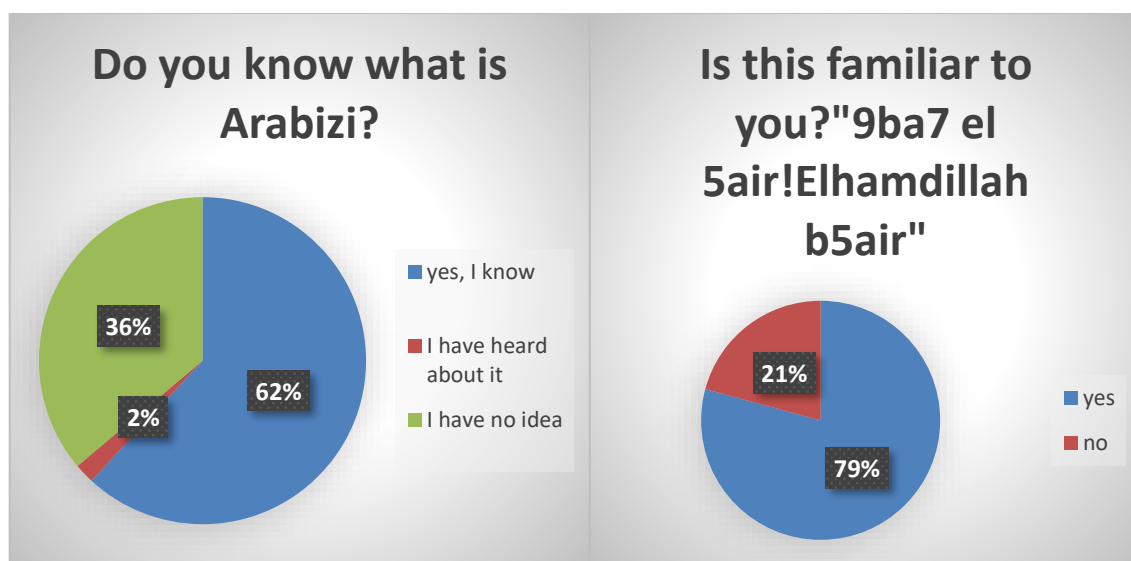


Fig.2. Answers to the questions in the survey.

The motivations for using Arabizi have been clear. However, people know what it is, they know how to use it but they reject it, even the young generation. The relationship between the Arabic language and native Arabic speakers is very strong and closely tied with the Arab identity (Allehaiby 2013: 59), and this is the main reason behind the answers. Earlier studies on Arabizi

⁶ This nomenclature is common among scientists and linguists, but the users themselves may not know the name of the Romanized Arabic script.

show that this form of writing has become a trend among young people in the beginning of online communication era, especially in North Africa. Today young people in Saudi Arabia prefer to use Arabic script in writing, which will be shown in the analysis of data from the next part of the questionnaire. This phenomenon occurs at a time when we were forced to exist virtually due to the pandemic and when Saudi Arabia – so far the most conservative Arab country – opens up to the world and becomes more flexible. Despite the above-mentioned factors that could diminish the role of the Arabic language today, young Saudis are strongly attached to their mother tongue. The majority of respondents agree that Arabizi does not look good and that it is unclear. In their opinion this form of Latin script is harmful to the Arabic language. Only few of the respondents stated that Arabizi is easier to communicate and “cool”.

Although young people in Saudi Arabia show their antipathy towards Arabizi, they still use it in some situations. The answers to the question about mixing Arabizi and English in one sentence were the following: 20,8% for yes and: 79,2% for no (Fig. 3).

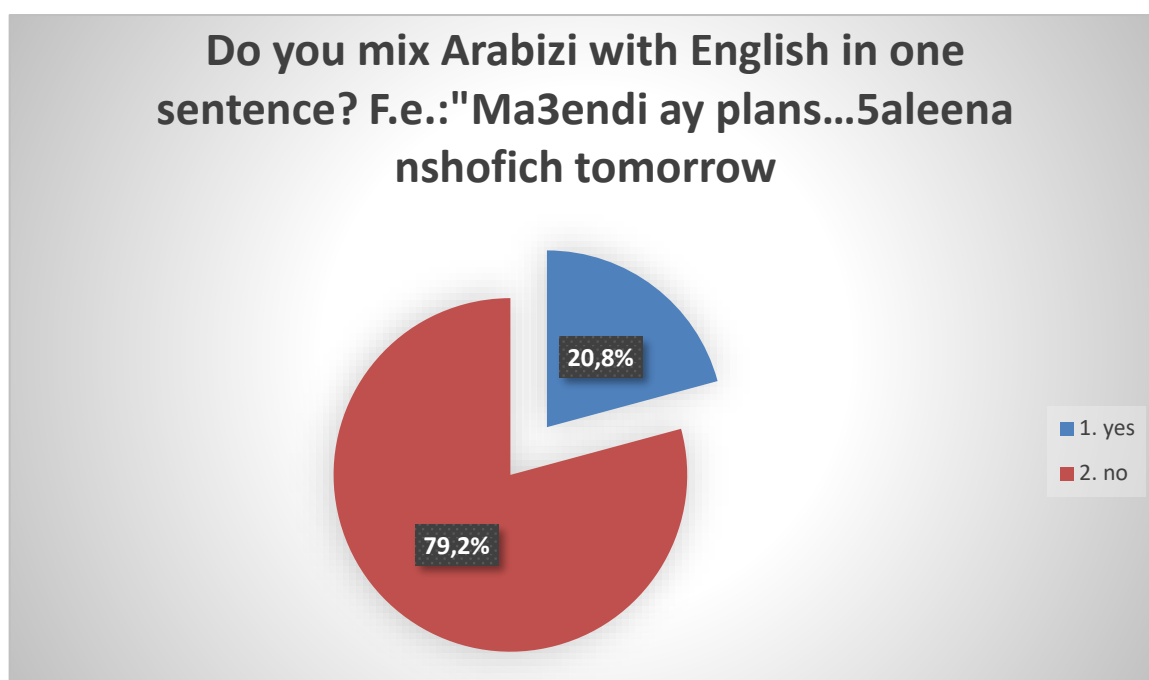


Fig. 3. Answers to the question about using Arabizi along with English in one sentence

Although Arabizi did not exist before the introduction of Internet, yet the examples of codeswitching with Arabic being used instead of English did occur. The survey from 1992, conducted on students from Saudi Arabia living in the United States shows that students switch from English to Saudi colloquial Arabic when they wish to express religious or spiritual feelings, as in the following examples:

They had a beautiful *mubxara*.

‘They had a beautiful incense burner’.

They used a big piece of *towb-i-ka’ba* for decoration.

‘They used a big piece of the black dress of the ka’ba for decoration.’

(Safi 1992: 75)

These examples refer to expressions that have no exact equivalent in English. For Saudis and all Muslims in general, Arabic words carry more affective load than the English ones (Safi 1992: 75). In Gulf dialects it is not always possible to determine the status of the lexical items from English, but some of them, e.g. *sem-sem* (from English “same same”) are well established in the vocabulary (Avram 2017: 185).

The Arabizi is used only among the younger generation, which is shown by another graph:

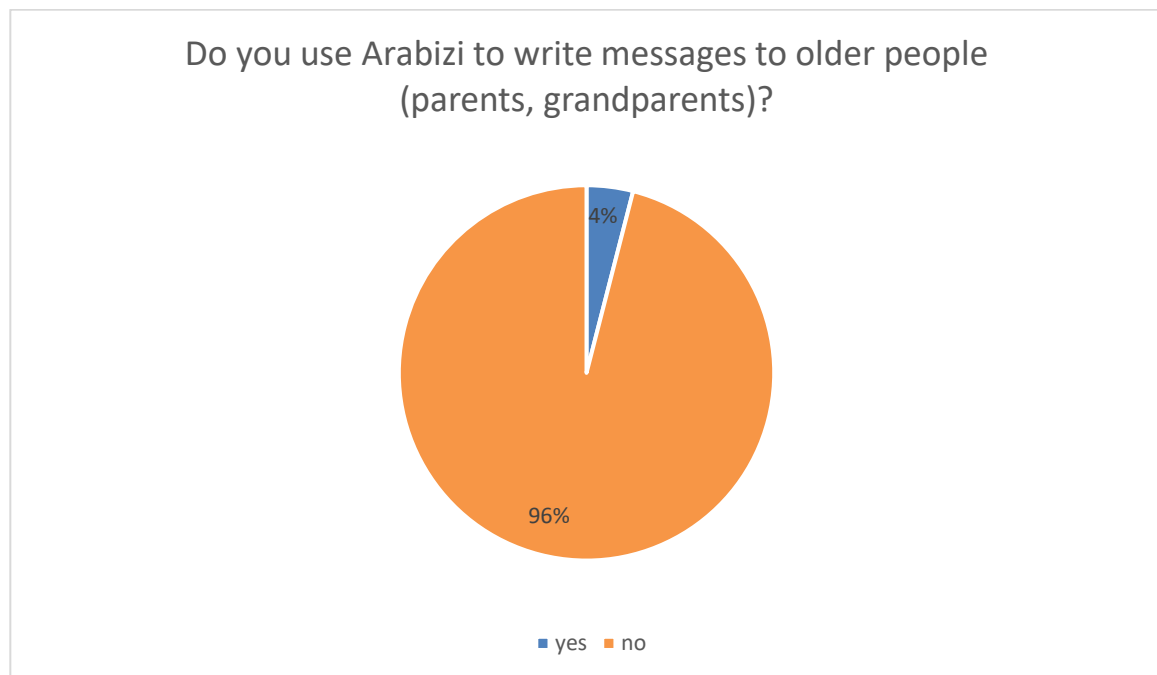


Figure 4. Answers to the question on using Arabizi with older generation

It is revealed that the majority of young people do not use Arabizi to contact the older generations. According to this survey, only 4 percent of the respondents claim to use this form of language with older family members. Arabizi is widely used by individuals and youngsters of the same age group⁷ and not used with older people or parents, also it is not used in formal

⁷Arabizi as an informal slang can be used also by the unique group of people not only characterized by age or nationality, but also a unique group of people who for several reasons use this form of communication. However, this should be analysed in a separate study.

writing (Bardaweel and Rababah 2021: 18). According to another study, none of participants chose to contact parents using Arabizi (Alsulami 2019: 263). The informal language that has been created and evolved over the last twenty years is unknown to the older generations. Although Arabizi is common among young people, it is often rejected by older generations or people of higher class (Allehaiby 2013: 57). Arabizi users have also admitted that this language system allows them to express themselves in a variety of ways that would otherwise be impossible when using Arabic script. For instance, Arabic script cannot support both uppercase and lowercase letters, in contrast to Arabizi. Therefore Arabizi is perceived as being clearer and easier to understand and convey (Allehaiby 2013: 58). According to Yanghan (2008: 42), the use of capital letters indicates yelling, excitement, emotions, or calls for special attention.

The next question in the survey was an open question which was: “Give me a short example of a random message to your friend”. By asking such a question, I wanted to check the actual use of language in text messages.

Table 1. Selected examples of random messages

Message	Comment
„Wenk 3m at9le 3lek”	“Where are you when I am calling you”- this example shows that Arabizi can express the whole sentence in only few letters.
„Hi, Shloonk?”	“hi, how are you?”
„Kent 3m ashof <u>al</u> TV”	“I was watching <i>the</i> TV” (“al TV”) - note that even while using Arabizi the Arabic definite article “al” is used, contrary to idiomatic English in this case
" خلاص اشوفك بكرة ان شاء الله "	“Ok, see you tomorrow Inshallah”
„Hey good morning, I would be happy if we can schedule something today”	The example of using English in text messages
" وينك؟ "	“Where are you?”
" هلا والله كيف حالك؟ "	“Hi there, how are you?”
" هلا بوي شخبارك؟ "	“Hi there boy, what’s up?”- note that the word “boy” is written in Arabic as the transcription of an English word
„Hi what time you going home?”	Another example of using English
„Yooooooooo”	An exclamation or emotional expression written in the Latin script

From the total sum of respondents' answers, those that were repeated were selected and presented in the above table. It is indicated that 56,25% of the young generation in Saudi Arabia use the Arabic language script for online contact, 25% use English, and 18,75% use Arabizi.

In order to check the motivation for using such forms of language, I asked an open question to specify the reasons for such answers. The majority of respondents claim that Arabizi is not common and does not even look good as a script (48,3%); another group states that the Romanized script of Arabic is a threat to the Arabic language (32,2%); and only some answers convey a positive connotation and claim Arabizi is easier to communicate (6,4%). There are some other answers, like "I don't know", "because Arabizi is cool" or "using regular language is easier", but it is only 3,2% of the respondents.

There was one answer in Arabic which shed new light on the use of Arabizi in online games that has never been investigated. Online video games are very common in Arabic countries. In order to communicate between the game players they use Arabizi, because it is easier and not everybody understands it. This is why some of the respondents claim to use the Romanized script of Arabic language, but this requires separate study.

5. Conclusions

Arabizi was created as a result of the development of internet technology. Gradually, the Arabic language used in its distinctive phonetic script began to be mixed with English words. As the global language English had a significant impact on the Arabizi communication style. Crystal (1995: 106) explains historical, political and economic reasons for the influence of English on other languages. He considers the legacy of the British and American imperialism as the historical reason. The political reason is 'providing a neutral means of communication' among different ethnic groups. Furthermore, English is considered as a language of international business and trade, which is the economic reason. For practical and intellectual reasons English became a language of science, for example in academic conferences, business and in technological systems. English is also the leading language of popular music, satellite broadcasting and tourism. Such ubiquitous effects make other languages impossible to keep their communication efficiency without the influence of English. Abu Melhim posits that Arab speakers tend to change their mother tongue to English to emphasize or clarify an utterance (1991: 242). This reason for code-switching between Arabic and English seems to be the most common, especially among Arabs talking with non-Arabs. The use of Arabic and English in one sentence is the sociolinguistic issue, which was explained by Gumperz (1976), who points out

that code-switching creates solidarity. The speaker switches to another language to show solidarity with the interlocutor.

It was found from the statistical data that the Arabic language has a strong position and most users of the social media tend to use their native vernacular. This enhances the status of the Arabic language and places it among the most widely used international languages. Nowadays there is a call to attend to the Arabic language and unify the efforts of linguists and research centres in order to Arabize social networking programs (Rashid 2020: 366). People believe that computer software and mobile phones now support the Arabic script and it is no longer necessary to use Arabizi (Allehaiby 2013: 60). On the other hand, there was a survey in 2018 which showed different attitudes to Arabizi among the young generation in Saudi Arabia. According to this research, (1) Arabizi is a code that is used for informal communication [47%]; (2) Arabizi is easier and faster than Arabic in terms of grammar and writing [24%]; (3) Arabizi is described as cool, stylish, trendy, and the language of young people on social media [22%]; (4) Arabizi may have some negative effects on the participants' Arabic writing skills [16%], and (5) Arabizi does not undermine the Arab culture and/or identity [90%] (Alghamdi and Petraki 2018: 7).

According to my research from the end of 2023, the majority of informants stated that they do not use Arabizi because it is harmful to the Arabic language and does not look good for them. According to Allehaiby, discarding the Arabic alphabet would symbolize letting go of the historical and cultural ties that the Arabic language represents (2013: 60). The aversion to using Arabizi can also be caused by the respect Muslims have for their religion. Islam is closely related to the present area of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Safi points that effectiveness is one of the main features of the language, which is a desire to express religious feelings through acceptable expressions. Equivalents of some words in English do not have the desired religious significance for speakers who are Muslims (Safi 1992: 77). My survey shows respect for Arabic even among the younger generation. For them, it is the Arabic language that preserves their identity as Arabs. The description of native speakers and their strong relations to Arabic was given by Barakat (1993: 33-34):

It has often been stated that the great majority of Arabs speak Arabic as their mother tongue and thus feel that they belong to the same nation regardless of race, religion, tribe, or region. This explains the tendency to dismiss the existing states as artificial and to call for political unity coinciding with linguistic identity. [...] There is, in fact, unanimous agreement among theoreticians of Arab nationalism on the great significance of language.

Although Arabizi is known as the language of the Youth of the New Era (اللغة العصر الشبابية) and has gained popularity and widespread usage among Arab youngsters (Alghamdi and Petraki 2018: 2), the result of my research shows a different perspective. My respondents explained that Arabizi is not standardized, so it can be confusing. According to Hagheh, Arabizi is used heavily by Arab bilinguals who were born or have lived abroad (2021: 157). My study was conducted among young people currently living in Saudi Arabia and this could be the reason for rejecting the use of Arabizi. The reasons for rejecting the use of Arabizi were:

“I don’t use it, because using regular language is easier”

“I don’t use it, because it doesn’t look good”

“I don’t use it because it is harmful to the Arabic language”

Another issue is that the Arabic language is used widely to express emotions, especially online (Gomaa 2007; Abdullah et al. 2018; El-Sayed et al. 2023). According to these researches, Arabic is used to express emotions by bilingual Arabs more often than English. Bukhar pointed out that English is a language with a rigid word order, whereas Arabic is more flexible (2022: 1). Weinreich suggests that bilingualism, diglossia, loanwords and code-switching are among the potential outcomes when multiple languages or language varieties are used within a specific context (2011: 10). Language can be used as an instrument for communication, but it can also be used as a symbol of one’s identity (Bassiouny 2009: 199). According to Alghamdi and Petraki, language is a powerful tool for expressing identity (2018: 4), thus by rejecting the Arabizi my respondents show significant attachment to their national identity.

Appendix

Different forms of online communication among youth in Saudi Arabia – questionnaire:

1. Do you know what Arabizi (Arabglizi) is? [multiple choice]

Yes, I know

I have no idea

I heard about it but I do not know what it is

2. Do you use Arabizi to contact your friends? [multiple choice]

- Yes, always

- Yes, sometimes

- No

3. What language do you use to contact your friends by social media (Messenger/WhatsApp/SMS etc.)?

-Arabic (Arabic script)

-Arabizi

-English (written)

-English (spoken/voice message)

-Arabic (spoken/voice message)

-other: _____

4. Is this familiar to you?: “9ba7 el 5air Elhamdillah b5air’

-yes

-no

5. Do you mix Arabizi with English in one sentence? E.g. “Ma3endi ay plans...5aleena nshofich tomorrow!”

-yes

-no

6. Give me a short example of a random message to your friend:

7. Do you use Arabizi to write messages to older people (parents, grandparents, professors, employers)?

-yes

-no

-sometimes I write like this to my parents

-other: _____

8. What is your age?

9. Are you a male or female?

-female

-male

10. Why do you use Arabizi? [multiple choice]

- It is easier to communicate

- It is cool

- I do not use it because it does not look good

- I do not use it because it is harmful for the Arabic language

- Other: _____

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