

Attitudes towards Arabic Romanization and Student's Major: Evidence from the University of Jordan

Hady Hamdan

Department of Linguistics
Faculty of Foreign Languages
University of Jordan
Amman, Jordan

Abstract

This paper seeks to unveil the attitudes of a sample of students at the University of Jordan towards the use of romanized Arabic in computer--mediated communication (CMC). In particular, it provides answers to two questions. First, do the subjects encode Arabic characters, including numbers, in a romanized version in their CMC? If yes, how often and why? Second, does the students' major and the language of instruction used therein (i.e. English or Arabic) affect their choice of Arabic romanization and their attitudes towards it? The data are collected by means of a questionnaire completed by students from four different majors: (1) Applied English, (2) Arabic, (3) Medicine, and (4) Islamic Sharia. While the majority of students of Applied English and Medicine tend to use Romanized Jordanian Arabic, the students of Arabic and Sharia show a clear preference for the use of Arabic letters. The users of Romanized Arabic cite a number of reasons for their choice. Some believe that Romanized letters are easier and faster to type than Arabic letters. Some posit that English is the language of the Internet and technology and, thus, the use of romanization gives communication a special flavor. A third group report that their devices do not support Arabic language. This study is expected to contribute to identifying the youth attitudes towards the use or avoidance of romanized Arabic, which in turn may help develop a better understanding of this issue and assist cyber Arabic users to make the right choice when interacting with others in Arabic online.

Keywords: Arabic, Arabizi, attitudes, chatting, CMC

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Introduction

With the growing role of technology and the Internet in communication, people began to shift their communication from face-to-face interaction to virtual communication or computer-mediated communication (CMC). This shift has attracted linguists from all over the globe to examine the common linguistic and/or stylistic characteristics of CMC (Crystal 2001; Paolillo 2001; Warschauer et.al 2002; Al-Khatib & Sabbah 2008; Cardenas-Carlos & Isharyanti 2009).

The study reported here investigates the attitudes of university students towards the use of romanized Jordanian Arabic in CMC. In particular, it seeks answers to the following questions: these question should be briefly highlighted in the abstract. See the comments

1. Do the subjects encode Arabic characters, including numbers, in a romanized version in their CMC? If the answer is in the affirmative, how often do they do that and why?
2. Does the students' major and the language of instruction used therein (i.e. English or Arabic) affect their choice of Arabic romanization and their attitudes towards it?

The study is driven by a general belief that the student's major plays a decisive role in determining the form in which Arabic is represented online. It is believed that Jordanian students whose major requires them to use English most of the time while in school or at home studying and preparing for their classes would most likely use romanized Arabic in their online interactions and would view this form of Arabic representation and its users favorably. In contrast, those whose major is Arabic or who are highly attached to Arabic in the course of their study such as students of Arabic and Islamic Sharia would not use romanized Arabic and would view it and its users negatively.

This study is expected to contribute to identifying the youth attitudes towards the use or avoidance of romanized Arabic, which in turn may help develop a better understanding of this issue and assist cyber Arabic users to make the right choice when interacting with others in Arabic online. Below is a brief description of Arabic in which romanization has started to gain currency as a written form of CMC.

Arabic language: an overview

Arabic is a descendent of the Semitic language family. In Arabic words are based on tri-consonantal roots. Different words can be formed from these roots through the use of infixes, prefixes and suffixes. The sociolinguistic situation in Arabic provides an example of 'diglossia', a case in which two linguistic varieties of the same language co-exist with each other but each is used for different social functions. The 'high' variety is Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is based on Classical Arabic (CA) and is used in formal contexts, literary works, courts, news broadcasts and religious based discourse. The low variety on the other hand is the colloquial variety of Arabic which encompasses a multitude of vernaculars and regional dialects used in the various Arabic-speaking countries and communities (Ferguson: 1959). "The MSA alphabet consists of 28 letters which represent 28 consonantal phonemes (Most et al. 2008:417)". According to Most et al (2008) three of the 28 letters are used to represent the long vowels, 'aa', 'ee', 'uu' respectively, whereas short vowels can be presented through diacritics. However, in Cyber Arabic, as will be shown below, numerals and signs are currently used to represent long and short vowels.

Literature review

Romanization or transliteration is "the representation of a word or phrase in the closest corresponding letters or characters of a different alphabet or language so that the pronunciation is as close as possible to the original word or phrase (Abdul-Jaleel & Larkey 2003: 86). In this study, the term transliteration or romanization is used to refer to the process in which speakers of Arabic resort to the use of alphabets or letters from English in addition to characters like numbers in order to represent it in CMC.

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the issue of romanization in Arabic in CMC hasn't received thorough investigation. Yaghan (2008) highlights the rules associated with the use of Arabizi, a term widely used to label the mixture of Latin and Arabic letters, its current state in society, as well as the reasons that lead young people to use it. While some of his subjects report that they resort to the use of Arabizi because of the historical precedence of English over Arabic in the Internet, others maintain that 'classical Arabic graphs' should be used for classical Arabic and not for slang (Yaghan 2008: 6). Other reasons include 'economy' as users of Arabizi report that they are able to incorporate more characters while texting messages through the phone. This reason is supported by Hamdan's study (2010) in which one of the interviewees who was working in a telecom company acknowledged that he was forced to use Arabizi as the cost per character of sending SMS text messages was lower in English than in Arabic.

In addition to the points highlighted above, Yaghan (2008) touches on the reasons why writing Arabic with English letters has become more acceptable than it was years ago. A reason he suggests is that English and Latin letters used to be associated with colonization and colonial powers, but nowadays the concept of a 'small knowledge village' with English as the most evident language as well as the domination of the western culture make "younger generations less hostile to Latin characters" (Yaghan 2008: 6).

The study reported here differs from Yaghan (2008). Not only does it examine the reasons underlying the use of romanization using a larger and more diversified sample, but it also discusses its frequency, the relation between its use and university major with reference to the language of instruction. Further, it sheds light on the attitude of proponents and opponents of romanization and its impact on Arabic from their own perspectives.

Historical overview

Aytürk (2010: 97) report that nearly half the world's population today uses the Roman alphabet. This includes the successful romanization of local scripts in Romania, Vietnam, and Turkey. In contrast, the romanization in Japan, India, China, and Greece, among others, have failed. As for the Arab world, there have been several calls by some orientalist and scholars such as Francis Newman, William Willcocks and Willmore (as cited in Suleiman 2004: 65-66, 69) for the adoption of a modified version of the Latin alphabet in writing Arabic. These calls are mainly motivated by the successful romanization process in modern Turkey. Further, the proponents of romanization suggest that Arabic characters are not in line with technology and development. Such calls are faced with strong opposition by the defenders of Arabic language such as Ahmad Attar (cited in Suleiman 2004: 46), who described these calls as being initiated and encouraged by the enemies of the Arabic language, Islamic culture and Qur'an.

In one of the earliest and most relevant studies on code switching and transliteration, Warschauer et al. (2002) investigate code switching of English and Arabic in Egyptians' online communications using different data collection techniques. The researchers report that English is most frequently used online, particularly in formal communication. In contrast, a version of Romanized colloquial Egyptian Arabic is used in informal communication which "had very limited use prior to the development of the internet (Warschauer et al. 2002). The researchers attribute the results to different reasons, viz., (1) early Egyptian internet adopter's fluency in English, (2) dominance of English in the internet, and (3) computer and internet lessons being taught in English.

In a recent study, Al Tamimi and Gorgis (2007) explore the nature of Romanized Jordanian Arabic in order to see how it is represented, in what ways it is close to both Standard as well as Jordanian Arabic. They also investigate the linguistic and non linguistic resources that the users of Romanized Jordanian Arabic drew on. The data comprise some 1098 informal email messages collected from 257 undergraduate students. In addition, they supplement their corpus with 1400 chat room turns exchanged among a large group of nicknamed chatters. The findings reveal that 10 out of the 28 consonants of Arabic have only one Roman character representing each and employed systematically while the rest of the consonants have more than one character each and thus variably represented. Furthermore, it is reported that for one Arabic character there can be up to 6 corresponding symbols, mainly Roman letters, in addition to Arabic numerals whose selection can be justified on pictorial and pronunciation basis. Vowels, on the other hand, are used less systematically with different sounds being assigned the same vowel character. They also report frequent code-switching and that 60% of the messages involve switching from English into Romanized Jordanian Arabic. The majority of switches involve nouns (61.84%).

In another recent study, Al-Khatib and Sabbah (2008) report that English and a romanized version of Arabic are most commonly used in students' messages over cellular phones. The study concludes that it is easier for the subjects "to communicate their ideas in messages written in Arabic with Roman scripts than in Arabic scripts (Al-Khatib and Sabbah, 2008: 45). Among the technical elements that lead to the extensive usage of English and the romanized version of Arabic are the ease and swiftness of writing in English and the rather limited space allowed in Arabic messages.

In a news story about transliteration written by Hamdan (2010), several Jordanian scholars express their concern about the spreading of transliteration among young generations. For instance, an associate professor of sociolinguistics at the Balqa Applied University suggests that there should be awareness campaigns to acquaint people with the dangers of practicing Arabic romanization or transliteration. "We should rescue Arabic and launch awareness campaigns as the threat has moved from the Internet to mobile phones and even to satellite TV channels", he warned.

Hamdan (2010) notes that this "professor linked the phenomenon to young Jordanians having more opportunities to meet foreigners, explaining that in today's increasingly interconnected world, English has become a lingua franca in which people who do not share a mother tongue can communicate.

A professor of sociology and mass communication at the University of Jordan (as quoted in Hamdan 2010) also draws a link between the spread of romanization and its ease of use in text

messages and on the Internet. Further, an associate professor of Arabic at the same university shows unease with this phenomenon and, urges young people to stop using transliteration before it does irreversible damage to their native language. "It is not a healthy practice and it might weaken the users' Arabic grammar in the long term if it continues at this rate," he said.

There have been several studies which tackle transliteration in shop signs (Abdul-Fattah & Zughoul 1996; Al-Kharabsheh, et al. 2008). However, few if any, examine transliteration in CMC, a reason that has encouraged the researcher to conduct this study to unveil the reasons behind the spread of romanization, particularly among Internet users at university and their attitudes towards it.

Method

The sample consisted of 160 students enrolled in four majors at the University of Jordan in 2014/2015. The four majors were Arabic, Islamic Sharia, Applied English and Medicine with 40 fourth year subjects in each. In terms of gender, the sample comprised 26 males and 134 females, and thus gender was not considered as a variable because both genders were not represented equally.

In order for the researcher to explore the attitudes of the respondents, he developed a questionnaire for this purpose based on Hussein (1999). The questionnaire which consisted of two sections and 17 items was written in Arabic so that it would be easily understood by all the subjects. The first 4-item section collected data on sex, major, proficiency level in English. It also elicited data on whether the respondents were in the habit of using Arabic romanization or not, the reasons for the use of this mode, frequency of use and whether they considered romanization a threat to the Arabic language or not. The subjects were requested to select the best choice from a given list. The second section was a 5-point Likert-type scale with 13 items. It elicited data on the subjects' attitudes towards Arabic romanization and its users. Respondents were asked to make a tick in any of the 5-point Likert scale columns next to each statement.

Results and discussion

The results of the study will be presented and discussed with direct reference to the study questions.

6.1. Do the subjects encode Arabic characters, including numbers, in a romanized version? If so, how often do they do that and why?

Table 1 *Number and percentage of romanized Arabic users in terms of major*

Major	Number	Percentage
Applied English	26	65%
Medicine	28	70%
Arabic	12	30%
Islamic Sharia	10	25%
Total	76	47.5

As is clear, 76 out of 160 subjects (47.5 %,) said they encoded Arabic characters in a romanized version whereas 84 (52.5%,) said they didn't. However, the use rate varied across the subjects' majors. The highest was reported by the Medicine (70%) and Applied English students (65%) where English is the language of instruction. The other two specializations where Arabic is the language of instruction scored the lowest rates. Thus, one can safely conclude that there is a strong link between the language of instruction and the use rate of romanization. English encourages romanization while Arabic inhibits it.

As for the frequency of romanization, the analysis of the data revealed that out of the total number of users of Arabic romanization ($n = 76$), 48 (63.2%), reported 'sometimes' use, 20 (26.3%) 'always' use, and 8 (10.5%) 'rare' use.

When asked why they Romanize, the users gave different answers. Table 2 shows the reasons for using numbers and Latin letters in representing Arabic.

Table 2 *Reasons for using romanization as reported by users*

Reason for using Romanization	Number	Percentage
1. I use romanization because my device doesn't support Arabic.	4	5.3
2. Typing Latin letters is faster than typing Arabic letters.	32	42
3. English is the language of the Internet and technology and the use of its alphabet gives communication a special flavour.	5	7
4. The use of romanization depends on the other party.	19	25
5. Combination of 2+3	10	13.1
6. Other reasons	6	7.9

Table 2 shows that 42% of the users of romanization resorted to this mode because they found using it to be faster than using the Arabic alphabet. This is quite logical since chatters often feel the pressure of time and the need to respond as timely as possible. The second most common reason for 25% of the users is partner dependant. A user here tends to use romanization when he/she realizes that the other partner is using it. This reason can be accounted for within the accommodation theory framework. It seems that the subjects who highlighted this reason were sending an indirect message to their interlocutress that they were similar and had something in common to share. A third group of users (13.1%) explained their choice by providing a combination of reasons 2 and 3 above. They said that they used romanized Arabic because English is the language of the Internet and technology and also because typing Latin letters is

faster than typing Arabic script. A fourth group (7%) used romanization because English is the language of the Internet, which gives communication a special flavour if its alphabet is used. A fifth group (5.3%) said they were not able to use the Arabic letters in CMC simply because their devices did not support Arabic. This is a reason dictated by necessity rather than attitude. Finally, some users chose to give other reasons for using romanization. For instance, one said that she used romanization because it is more fun. Two users indicated that romanization enabled them to incorporate more characters, particularly in the case of SMS. Other users reported that they used it because they couldn't write well in Arabic. In light of the reasons mentioned above, one can clearly conclude that the use of romanization is actually based on specific needs and reasons.

Reasons for using romanization as suggested by non-users

The non-users of romanization (who turned out to be 104, i.e. 52.5% of the subjects) were asked to suggest reasons which they think motivate others to Romanize. In actuality, 30 of them ignored the question and/or provided a general response which can be glossed as "It's not easy to think on behalf of others". Below is a list of the hypothetical reasons suggested by at least five of the remaining non-users who attempted the question:

1. Romanizers are fascinated by English and western culture.
2. Romanizers' standard Arabic language is deficient.
3. Romanizers use this mode as a way to show that they are educated
4. Romanizers want to impress others as being part of a high social class.

Apparently, these reasons are mainly negative and highlight social and cultural variables.

Romanization and students' attitudes toward Arabic

Despite the fact that the students' major and the language of instruction related to it appeared to be a determining variable in shaping the reasons underlying romanization and its frequency of occurrence, such a variable didn't turn out to be equally decisive in shaping their attitudes towards its impact on Arabic. Here students from all majors, showed agreement that using Latin letters would endanger Arabic in the long run. When asked whether they felt that romanization would endanger Arabic, 118 out of 160 (74%) answered in the affirmative.

In response to another related question which asked the respondents who labeled themselves as non-users of romanization why they thought it endangered Arabic, the following most commonly perceived reasons were provided.

1. Arabic romanization weakens one's ability to form grammatically well formed sentences in Arabic. This is, indeed, a threat that some Arab scholars warned of. For example, Khalil (as cited in Hamdan 2010) considered Arabic romanization as an "unhealthy practice and it might weaken the users' Arabic grammar in the long term if it continues at this rate"
2. It marginalizes Arabic locally and internationally.
3. It weakens one's abilities to read and write Arabic texts.
4. It undermines the socio-political identity of the Arab youth and makes some of them west-oriented.

However, most of the 26% of the students who thought that romanization did not pose a threat to Arabic justified their response by positing that this mode of writing is only used in CMC and thus does not threaten Arabic, their mother tongue. Some even went further to say that

Arabic is the language of Qur'an and that this reason is strong enough to preserve it safe and protected.

A closer examination of the data pointed to a relationship between the subjects' major and language of instruction on the one hand and the subjects' perception of the romanizer's loyalty to Arabic. 65 % of Applied English students and Medicine students combined who receive instruction in English disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "those who romanize Arabic are not loyal to the Arabic language". This tolerance toward romanizers is in line with the fact that 67.5 % of the students of these two specializations do actually romanize. In contrast, 30% of the Arabic language and Islamic Sharia students combined who receive instruction in Arabic disagreed or strongly disagreed to the same statement. This rather hard position toward romanizers is a manifestation of the fact that 72.5% of the students in these two majors do not romanize.

Data on students' attitudes towards Arabic characters were also elicited and analyzed. 78% of the respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "Arabic letters are not compatible with technology". Put differently, the majority of users and non-users of romanization did not see that the use of Arabic letters is a hindrance to technology and progress. In fact, most of those who used romanization reported that they did so either because typing Latin letters is faster than typing Arabic script or because they wanted to accommodate the other partner and not because they looked at the use of the Arabic alphabet as an obstacle to technological development.

The use of romanization sometimes brings an important question to the fore. Is the use of this mode of writing a sign of deficiency in the Arabic language of the romanizer? The four groups of subjects reacted differently to this question. The percentages of subjects who provided a negative answer were as follows: Applied English (55 %), Medicine (50 %), Arabic Language (25%) and Islamic Sharia (30%). As is clear, around half of the Applied English and Medicine students did not perceive a positive relationship between the use of romanization and the deficiency of the Arabic language of the romanizer whereas the majority of students of Arabic and Sharia posited that the use of romanization and avoidance of Arabic letters is a sign of deficiency in the Arabic language of the user of this mode.

Finally, the subjects were asked if "it is difficult to represent spoken Arabic in CMC through the use of Arabic letters". Different responses were given in terms of specialization. 40% of the Medicine students agreed to statement, 55% disagreed and 5% indicated uncertainty. The responses of the Applied English students were almost the same: 40% agreed, 50% disagreed and 10% said they were uncertain. In contrast, 20% of the Arabic students agreed to the statement, 60% disagreed and 20% were uncertain. The Sharia students were equally divided: 35% agreed, 35% disagreed and 30% were uncertain.

The relatively high percentage of agreement to the statement above by the Applied English and Medicine students is probably a reflection of a low-to-moderate level of sensitivity towards the representation of spoken Arabic by Latin letters. The high percentage of rejection to the statement by the Arabic students may reflect their pride in Standard Arabic, the variety they study and practice in class, and thus still believe that spoken Arabic should not be tolerated in writing regardless of the mode. The position of the Sharia students is somewhere in the middle,

and not easy to account for. Anyway, it may be the case that this question was not very clear and thus was understood differently by the various groups and subjects. The variation among the respondents' responses might have been driven by the fact that being able to represent spoken Arabic in Arabic or Latin letters is a matter of personal judgment and thus each subject is his or her own assessor.

Romanization and social class

In response to a question on possible relationship between the use of romanization and social class or status, 76% of the subjects disagreed or strongly disagreed to the statement "those who write Arabic in Latin letters are of a higher socio-economic status. This finding may be taken as a clear indication that there is no correlation between socio-economic class and the use of romanization.

Conclusion

The findings of the study provided evidence that students' major and the language of instruction used therein was an important variable in determining use or non-use of Arabic romanization. It also contributed to shaping their attitudes towards this mode of writing and its users. Students of Applied English and students of Medicine who received their instruction in English were more in favor of Arabic romanization than students of Arabic and Islamic Sharia who received their instruction in standard Arabic. Further, the majority of both users and non-users of romanization agreed that it might endanger the Arabic language if it continues to be used at the current rate in the long run.

Users of romanization reported various reasons for using this mode. The most commonly shared ones included ease and swiftness in typing Latin letters in addition to accommodating one's mode of writing to that of the other partner with whom an individual is interacting. Finally, the subjects did not see any clear connection between the Romanizer and his/her social class or status.

About the Author:

Hady Hamdan is a full-time English language instructor who works at the Department of Linguistics in the University of Jordan. He is interested in areas like Sociolinguistics, Computational Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, and Pragmatics.

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