The Effect of Social Media on Arabic Vocabulary in the Saudi Society

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Dr. Abdulwahed Alzumor
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Abstract

The main goal of this research was to investigate the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary in the Saudi context and to explore the reasons behind the phenomenon of using English words instead of Arabic words in speaking and writing. In order to achieve the goal of this study, the researcher conducted an online questionnaire with close-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was distributed to 388 Saudi women and men of different ages, genders, and different educational backgrounds. As a result, an obvious effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary was found; social media platforms contributed to the phenomenon by spreading English words in the Saudi society. Additionally, various other reasons behind this phenomenon were found by the researcher.

Keywords: Arabic vocabulary, Arabizi, Code-switching, Social media, Translanguaging, Vocabulary.
1. Introduction

No one can ignore the reality of social media and how it has become an essential part of daily life. In other words, several social media platforms are used for multiple purposes, including, education, business, traveling, shopping, entertainment, and communication. With regard to these uses we only think about this tool as a treasure of enormous benefits and as a magic of easier and faster life which is totally true.

An obvious example of the impact of social media is in communication. In other words, the way language is used has changed because of the noticeable effect of social media. As a result, English words are used more commonly than Arabic ones in the Saudi society. I noticed that this phenomenon has emerged recently in the Saudi society; people who are not English language speakers replace many Arabic words with English ones, whether speaking in public places, like restaurants and cafés, or using social media applications, like Twitter and Snapchat. In addition, most of these English words are commonly used by social media users. For instance, the researcher has observed a lot of Saudis saying “pistachio” instead of “fustuq” due to social media advertisements that use English words rather than Arabic ones. In another instance, a simple story happened with the researcher in a pharmacy in Yanbu city. The researcher asked a pharmacist, who was a Saudi girl, “لديكم قفازات؟” She replied “تقصدي تفصدي” She replied “gloves?” Although the pharmacist knew the meaning of the Arabic word, she chose to use the English one. Both of these experiences illustrate this new phenomenon within the Saudi society.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Saudis’ use of social media has affected their use of the Arabic language, particularly their vocabulary. They replace many Arabic words with English ones in daily life for several reasons.
1.2 Objectives of the Study

This research aimed to investigate the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary as well as the reasons for this effect.

1.3 Significance of the Study

This study was to explore and clarify the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary.

1.4 Research Questions

This research attempted to investigate the following questions:

1. How does social media use affect Arabic vocabulary?

2. How is the phenomenon of using English vocabulary rather than Arabic vocabulary expressed within Saudi society?

3. What are the reasons for the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Social Media

Social media is considered as an important online tool in the society nowadays. Furthermore, it has its own noticeable impacts on different aspects of life, whether this effect is positive or negative. Handley and Chapman (2010) defined social media as a growing collection of online tools that allow people to interact with each other and share information. WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Snapchat are examples of the most usable social media applications.
2.2 Vocabulary

Vocabulary, which can be defined as a group of letters that carries a particular meaning in each language, is an important part of any language. People must enrich their vocabulary in any language in order to express or comprehend ideas, feelings, or needs using four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. According to Neuman and Dwyer (2009), “vocabulary is the words that we have to know in order to communicate effectively: in speaking, words are productive and in listening words are receptive” (p.385).

2.3 Social Media and Code-Switching

Code-switching is a sociolinguistic phenomenon in which the speaker of a certain language switches to another language within the same context. This switch between languages can occur in vocabulary or phrases. According to Omar and Ilyas (2018), a major shift in the use of colloquial Arabic—both in writing and speaking—has been influenced by code-switching. The spread of this phenomenon is obvious in the code-switching used by presenters and actors on radio, television, and social media programs in Saudi Arabia (Omar & Ilyas, 2018).

Such as a claim clarifies how this phenomenon spreads in the Saudi society and becomes a normal part of the society. As previously mentioned social media and code-switching both are important terms and can be found in any community. Moreover, there are many various reasons behind the phenomenon of code-switching. However, this research focused specifically on the effect of social media on code-switching and the reasons why the vocabulary of social media users is affected. In a study of 80 Arabic participants, Samhan (2017) found that age and education play a significant role in the effect using Twitter and Facebook has on language.
Furthermore, Samhan (2017) provided different examples of how people use code-switching between Arabic and English in social media applications.

2.4 Social Media and Translanguaging

According to Kasula (2016), “translanguaging is a common phenomenon for multilinguals, at points feeling the most natural form of communication or expression. Translanguaging acknowledges the multiple identities and languages of its speakers through creating a space where values, culture, language, and history can be expressed” (p.111). In a study of 360 participants, Dumrukcic (2020) clarified the relationship between social media and the term translanguaging, as well as the reasons for translanguaging in social media and how this phenomenon can be positively effective for learning a new language. The researcher also discussed the difference between translanguaging and code-switching. An important point in mentioned in Dumrukcic (2020) study, showed that the phenomenon of translanguaging can not only relate to the young adults because the number of users of translanguaging was almost even among different age groups. In this case we can see that age is not considered an important variable in the phenomenon of translanguaging.

2.5 Social Media and Arabizi

Kessas (2019) claimed that many linguists use the term “Arabizi” to describe the phenomenon of using English words while speaking Arabic. According to Kessas (2019), this phenomenon is a threat to the Arabic language and Arabic identity, especially because of its fast spread among Arabic societies due to the presence of social media. An example of this phenomenon is the Arabic sentence “نتقابل في الويك اند” which has the English word “weekend”, which nowadays most of Arabic speakers use it instead of the Arabic equivalent “اجازة نهاية الاسبوع” or “عطلة”. 
Kessas (2019) identified that since everyone is using social media nowadays this usage has its positive and negative effects on the Arabic language; social media contributes positively by providing applications that help teach Arabic language, but it also affects the Arabic language negatively in speaking and writing by spreading English terms in the society. For instance, the English word “Selfi” which occurred after the emerged of SnapCht. Another example is the policy of Twitter which determines the number of letters and this encourage the users to write in English or use short forms of writing.

According to Farhan and Alhalbousi (2019), social media has an important effect on the Arabic language that cannot be ignored, whether positive or negative. Besides, most of the participants in their study agreed that social media has an influence on the Arabic language (Farhan & Alhalbousi, 2019). This showed that the majority of people are aware that social media has a noticeable effect on language and this is really significant because when people have the awareness about any problem they can determine the reasons of this problem and work to find suitable solutions.

2.6 Causes of Using English Words instead of Arabic in the Arabic Societies

As any phenomenon or case in the world, there should be certain causes behind it. Therefore, In the case of using or replacing Arabic words with English words there are various reasons that differ from one to another. When studying the effect of social media on language in Saudi Arabia, Zoghari (2019) found that translanguaging and code-switching have various reasons, including the following:

1. Knowing and speaking English is considered prestigious among Saudis.

2. English is easier and faster to use.
3. Many young adults lack knowledge about and pride in their heritage and the use of the Arabic language.

4. Most technological programs or applications are founded by English speakers and therefore use English terminology, and few efforts are made to translate these into Arabic.

These entire reasons can explain that we can not refer to only one reason for translanguaging or to the phenomenon of using English words rather than Arabic; instead, the reasons vary according to the cultural, technological, and educational background of the speaker. Moreover, Alshwyrkh (2014) believed that not all users of English words prefer the English language; rather, the lack of Arabic equivalents in certain circumstances forces them to use English words in speaking or writing. In addition, Sutrisno and Ariesta (2019) claimed that mixing the languages together and using foreign words while using your mother tongue is mainly found in informal situations. This claim can clarify that using a foreign language while speaking or writing does not mean that the speaker is a fluent in that foreign language and it could be the reason of why some speakers only mixing words in informal conversations.

2.7 Consequences of Using English Words instead of Arabic in the Arabic Societies

All phenomena in the world have some consequences, whether positive or negative. In a study of 167 students at Imam Muhammed Bin Saud Islamic University, Zoghari (2019) found that social media use affected different linguistic aspects of the students’ Arabic. Furthermore, Farhan and Alhabousi (2019) argued that students’ writing and ability to express their ideas in Arabic are weak as a consequence of using English words that appear on social media.
2.8 The Literature Gap

Most of the previous studies have focused on how people use translanguaging in social media. Few studies have investigated the effect and influence of social media on Arabic vocabulary especially in the Saudi context.

3. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the use of social media affected the use of Arabic vocabulary. So, this section includes an explanation of the research in detail. It covers research method, research tools, sample of the research, and data collection procedures.

3.1 Research Method

To achieve its objectives, this research used a quantitative method, which involved a questionnaire, to collect data.

3.2 Research Tools

The researcher used the following as a research tool in order to collect data and accomplish the objectives of the study.

1. A questionnaire was designed online using Google Forms and contained a few questions to be answered within 10 minutes. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included. The questionnaire aimed to determine how social media use affects Arabic vocabulary in the Saudi society.
3.3 Sample of the Research

This study examined a sample of 388 Saudi men and women from different cities in Saudi Arabia.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

The data of this research were collected using an online questionnaire, which was distributed among 388 Saudi men and women. Completing all the questions was mandatory. The questionnaire was available to the participants for a week in order to obtain as many responses as possible. The results of the questionnaire were analyzed using Excel software.

4. Results and Discussions

In this section of the research, the researchers present and discuss the results of the questionnaire data after being analyzed by using Excel program. The purpose of this section is to relate the findings of the questionnaire with the main research questions.

Figures 1–3 show the demographics of the participants. It shows the age, gender, and the nature of the community they live in. Of the participants, 60% were over 40 years old, 17% were 30–39 years old, 12% were 20–29 years old, and 11% were 15–19 years old. Of those who responded to the questionnaire, 80% were females, and only 20% were males. Furthermore, 72% of the participants did not live or work in a community that used the English language as a medium for instructions, while 28% lived or worked in a community that used the English language most of the time.

As seen in Figure 1, the majority of participants using social media were older; thus, the effect of social media was not, as commonly supposed, more prevalent among teenagers. Indeed,
Dumrukcic (2020) found that using foreign words rather than the native language is not correlated with a specific age group. Furthermore, the 72% of participants who did not live or work in an environment where English was frequently used showed that their community was not a factor in their use of English vocabulary because as we know sometimes people’ language got influenced by the environment they live in. For example, my Arabic vocabulary got influenced by English ones as a result of spending 9 hours in the university where English language was the medium of instructions there. So, I used to say “homework” instead of “واجب” and “عندي حصة” instead of “عندي كلاس” unlike, my sisters who were in school where the medium of instructions was Arabic and they used to say the previous words in Arabic. So, the environment is an important factor.

Figure 1. Age of the Participants

Figure 2. Participants’ Gender
Figure 3. Response to the question, “Do you live or work in a community that uses the English language most of the time?”

Figures 4 and 5 show the educational backgrounds of the participants. The educational background was gathered to determine whether a certain level of education or a certain level of English language impacted participants’ use of English vocabulary. Of the participants, 62% held bachelor’s degrees, and 27% held high school degrees. Only 7% and 2% had master’s and doctoral degrees, respectively. Therefore, use of English vocabulary was not limited to people with a higher level of education. Moreover, 51% of the participants used the English language at an intermediate level, while 25% were beginners and only 24% their levels in English were advanced. This indicates that, the participants’ level of English language proficiency was not a main factor in using English vocabulary. Even those who were not English speakers used some English words.

Figure 4. Participants’ degree of education
Figures 6–8 show how social media use affected Arabic vocabulary. Of the participants, 98% used social media applications, such as Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp, while only 2% did not use social media and this shows that the majority of people use these applications. Moreover, 52% of the participants believed that they learned some English words through social media, while 48% did not. Some of the words that participants learned were “capture,” “subscribe,” “retweet,” “application,” “group,” “post,” “share,” “discount,” “weekend,” and “tutorial.” This clarifies that social media has its effect on people as many of them gave examples of words they learned through using social media. Of the participants, 52% used these English words while speaking, and 41% used them in both speaking and writing. Only 7% of the participants used the English vocabulary only in writing. This finding showed that people not only were exposed to these words by social media, but that they also used them almost daily, whether through speaking or writing.

Figure 5. Participants’ English language proficiency

Figure 6. Participants’ use of social media applications
In addition to the previous point, the researcher noticed that some people in the Saudi society used English words consistently in place of their Arabic equivalent and wanted to investigate this notice to also clarify the research questions, how social media use affected Arabic vocabulary by asking the participants “which of the following words you use more when you go to public places?” As a result, 82% of the participants used “café,” while only 18% of them used “مقهى” (Fig. 9). While 71% of the participants used the English word “spicy,” only 29% used the Arabic word “حار” (Fig. 10). Furthermore, 58% of the participants used “pistachio cake,” while 42% used “كيكة فستق” (Fig. 11). Even though these words had Arabic equivalents, the participants used the English vocabulary. Use of the Arabic “ربيان” and English “shrimp” was almost equivalent, with 55% of the participants using Arabic and 45% using English (Fig. 12). The participants also believed that those they were speaking to would understand the previous English words; 51%
said listeners would understand, 41% had no idea if listeners would understand, and only 9% believed listeners would not understand them when using English vocabulary (Fig. 13). The figures clearly show that the majority use English words even when the listeners understand them so clarifying an idea also not a reason for using English.

Figure 9. Use of “café” versus “مقهى”

Figure 10. Use of “spicy” versus “حار”

Figure 11. Use of “pistachio cake” versus “كيكة فستق”
According to figure (14), (15), (16), and (17) we can see the following: Of the participants, 85% believed that using English vocabulary instead of Arabic ones was a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia, while 6% did not believe it was a phenomenon and 9% had no idea (Fig. 14). As shown in Figure 15, 53% of the participants had a negative attitude toward the phenomenon of using English vocabulary rather than Arabic vocabulary, 24% had a positive attitude, and 23% did not know whether the phenomenon was positive or negative. Accordingly, 63% of participants believed that social media contributed to the phenomenon of using English vocabulary instead of Arabic vocabulary in the Saudi context, and 31% were not sure, 4% did not believe social media contributed to the phenomenon, and the rest of the participants which they were only 2% had no idea as seen in (Fig. 16). The last point in this part as seen in Figure 17, clarified that 58% of the participants believed that using English words rather than Arabic ones in the Saudi context
would affect the Arabic language negatively, 28% believed it might affect Arabic language negatively, while 13% of the participants did not think that the phenomenon would affect the Arabic language negatively, and only 1% of the participants had no idea if it would affect Arabic language or not.

Figure 14. Participants’ perception of whether using English words is a phenomenon in Saudi Arabia

Figure 15. Participants’ attitude toward the phenomenon (using English words instead of Arabic ones)

Figure 16. Participants’ perception of whether social media contributes to the phenomenon
Figure 17. Participants’ perception of whether using English words will affect Arabic negatively

All these previous responses highlighted how the phenomenon of using English vocabulary rather than Arabic vocabulary was perceived within Saudi society, thus answering the second research question. As clarified in figure (14), (15), (16), and (17) the majority of Saudi participants noticed that using English words became a phenomenon within the Saudi society which proved that this phenomenon is exist, and half of the participants had a negative attitude toward this phenomenon, they did not like it and they criticized the existence of such a phenomenon. Many campaigns and slogans in Saudi Arabia also highlight the phenomenon, encouraging people to use Arabic words rather than English words in public places; for example, one famous slogan in Saudi Arabia says “speak Arabic” or “تحدث العربية.” This campaign aims to activate Arabic language uses and practices among youth and also aims to improve the Arabic language skills among its speakers. In addition, since using social media applications became an essential part of our lives, a large number of the participants believed and had the awareness that social media plays a significant role in spreading English words in the Saudi society. This is what encouraged the researcher to think about writing this paper because I am one of those Saudis who noticed the effect of social media on Arabic language and many of the English words that mentioned earlier as examples became common in the Saudi society because people exposure to these words almost daily while they are using social media.
In alignment with a study by Kessas (2019), the participants of the present study believed that using English words would have a negative effect on the Arabic language. In contrast, the researcher believes that using any language will have both positive and negative effects, depending on the awareness of the society. However, in the case of this paper, this phenomenon does seem to impact the Arabic language negatively; many people now make mistakes when writing in Arabic because they write in English or use English abbreviations; also, many people replace some Arabic words with English ones when they speak.

The last open-ended question of the questionnaire was “According to your opinion, what are the reasons behind using English words instead of Arabic?” The responses to this question answered and clarified the third research question, “What are the reasons behind the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary?” The participants in this question mentioned several reasons that they think are the reasons of using English words rather than Arabic ones in the Saudi society, the most repeated reasons were for prestige and for displaying the speaker’s education. Other reasons given were social media use and the impact of famous “influencers” who use these English words. Furthermore, most workers in public places, such as coffee shops or restaurants, use English words with their customers. Additionally, some of the English words do not have equivalents in Arabic because most social media applications are founded by English speakers. Further responses to this question were related to the weakness of the Arabic identity and lack of pride in the Arabic language. Other participants believed that the need to learn and practice English, since it is a required language in different jobs, was the reason for using English words, so when they learn a new English word they keep use it as a kind of practice the language and not to forget it. All these various reasons agreed with those previously stated in other studies conducted in Saudi Arabia by Zoghari (2019) and Alshwyrkh (2014). Accordingly, the
researcher can notice that the social class played an important role in spreading the use of English words rather than Arabic words in some places, and the old idea that most people have that speaking English indicates a high level of education and class is still existent in Saudi society.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of social media on Arabic vocabulary in the Saudi context and to determine the reasons behind the phenomenon of replacing Arabic words with English ones. The study found that social media had a noticeable contribution in increasing and spreading some English words in the Saudi society; Saudis acquired several English words by using social media applications, and they used these words in their daily lives as spoken or written communications. This phenomenon was either positive or negative depending on the way that the Saudis chose to use the English words.

In my opinion, social media is a useful tool that can make everything easier to us, and according to languages social media has a positive effect in spreading languages all over the world in enormous aspects and fields and also it has a negative effect in weakens people’s native languages. Furthermore, Saudi users of these social media applications should determine how to take advantage of the English words that are used in social media. They could use these words to learn, practice, and improve their English language, or they could use them to show off, weaken their spoken and written Arabic, and hide their Arabic identity. All these choices could be easily determined when the person has the awareness about the importance of his/her native language, and this awareness is the responsibility of the individuals, communities, and governments.
6. The limitations of the Study

Each researcher had faced limitations while doing his/her research. The researcher faced some limitations while conducting the current study. The limitations were as follows. First, the study period was not long enough to the researcher in order to use additional research tools that would have enriched the results. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic prohibited use of a research tool that the researcher believed it would have positively contributed to this paper (i.e., observation in public places). Third, the previous studies on this topic were not enough to help the researcher in reading about it whether the general Arabic context or the specific Saudi context had been studied because previous studies always contributes in enriching the researcher’s main points of study. Fourth, in the questionnaire the number of female participants was double that of male participants and this could affect the study since it conducted on all Saudis without specifying a certain gender. Finally, some of the participants did not answer the open-ended questions on the questionnaire.

7. The Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations might help prevent the Arabic language from the negative effects of using English words:

1. Arabic researchers should make efforts to increase the number of studies on the phenomenon of using English words rather than Arabic ones in order to explore the reasons behind the phenomenon and provide practical solutions for protecting the Arabic language.

2. Arabic language academies should increase their efforts in finding suitable equivalent Arabic words to new English words that Arabic speakers need, especially those in the technical field.
3. Educational institutions, such as schools and universities, can have a great impact in this issue. They should increase awareness of the essential link between language and identity and the need for other languages to be learned without affecting the mother tongue.

4. Parents should encourage their children’s use of Arabic words rather than English ones since most of them encourage their children to learn English language. This suggestion is, of course, not denying the importance of learning other languages.

5. People should be mindful about their social media use and be aware that their exposure to social media for a long time will cause them to acquire English words subconsciously.

6. Technologists should provide Arabic applications.

7. The number of competitions that encourage reading and writing the Arabic language should be increased. A great example of such a competition is the “Arab Reading Challenge” competition by Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid.

8. Campaigns and slogans that encourage the use of Arabic should be increased, especially in public places, such as coffee shops and restaurants.

The result of implementing these suggestions would contribute in preventing Arabic language and improve the Arabic language skills among its speakers effectively.
References


