

# Facebook as a Mode of Communication among Jordanian University Students

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## Abstract

This study aims at investigating the Facebook language in terms of content and form as used by Jordanian university students from a sociolinguistic perspective. It also attempts to examine the effect of the sociolinguistic factors such as sex and religion. Moreover, this study seeks to throw light upon the types of linguistic choices employed by the students and to figure out the motivations behind using this form of writing. The data were collected by means of interviews. In addition, the researcher collected some data and messages from students' profiles after taking their permission. The findings of this study showed that there are certain linguistic features and functions used in the Facebook language. Besides, the major argument developed in such a study is that the language used in the Facebook has some peculiarities which distinguish it from other forms of language. Furthermore, it was quite noticeable that the language of Facebook appears to be conditioned by sociological factors such as sex and religion.

**Keywords:** Computer Medicated Communication (CMC), Code-switching, Romanized Arabic, Abbreviation

## 1. Introduction

It is obvious that the technological inventions have a great influence on our daily life communications. In other words, the appearance of Facebook, Yahoo Messenger, E-mail and Short Text Messages has some consequences on the language which is used by the students who are interested in this electronic way of communication. In this sense, Computer Medicated Communication (CMC) is considered one of the major means used by university students in order to keep in touch with each other. While using modes of CMC, the students are using a wide range of linguistic choices and functions which need to be investigated and examined thoroughly. Therefore, CMC is a contemporary subject which touches upon languages, and it has its own consequences on the structure and function of the languages. It is also known that CMC is of two main types: the first type is synchronous CMC, while the second one is the asynchronous CMC. The former requires direct communication where the participants are time-synchronized. In other words, all parties involved in the communication are available simultaneously. This includes a telephone conversation, a company board meeting, and a chatroom. On the other hand, the latter does not require that all participants must be involved in the communication at the same time. This type has many forms such as e-mail messages, discussion boards, blogging, and text messaging. On the whole, Facebook is said to be included in both synchronous and asynchronous communication.

## 2. Literature Review

CMC leads to a real dichotomy among researchers as whether to regard CMC as a written or a spoken form of language. Thus, many writers have different points of view about the nature of this electronic way of communication. Some of them say that it is something in-between. That is to say, it shares features from both the spoken and the written form of language. On the other hand, some researchers, like Crystal, consider it as a new genre and he calls it a third genre.

As a matter of fact, Crystal (2001) rings the alarm that CMC is to be considered as a new form of language that includes linguistic properties of both the spoken language and the written one. Consequently, he believes that CMC is more than an amalgam of spoken and written language due to the fact that it has distinctive features that found neither in the spoken form of the language nor in the written one. As a result, Crystal has chosen to come up with a new name when he termed it a "third medium". In a similar vein, Crystal (2010) admits that

technology always changes the language. When printing came to the scene in the 1400s, it changed the language. Furthermore, we can see new styles of English developing. As a result of that, we can notice that there are new systems of punctuation and spelling coming into existence.

On his own part, Thurlow (2003) admits that the young people and new technologies have to be blamed because they threaten and jeopardize the traditional standard rules of the language. Warschauer (2007) goes further to argue that information and communication technologies are having a deep effect on all aspects of language use especially in the written form of communication. By the same token, Biesenbach-Lucas & Wiesenforth (2001) emphasize the fact that electronic communication places new demands on language that resulted in interesting variations in the written form of language. More subtly, Baron (2003) points out that the relationship between speech and writing has really changed. Writing has increasingly become a mirror of informal speech; she admits that speech has its effect on writing.

Baron (2008) also hints to the fact that there is a special language that could be used in online and this language is restricted to such electronic online communication. In like manner, Al-Khatib & Sabbah (2008, p. 38) indicate that the existence of CMC leads to a real dichotomy among researchers as whether to consider CMC as written or spoken forms of language. In a similar vein, Al-Khatib (2008) carried out a study about emails as a mode of communication to see whether e-mail, as a new mode of communication, denotes the appearance of a new genre of writing. He finds that electronic mail messages have certain peculiarities and features of their own which are the consequence of using a new medium of communication. As for code switching in email, Al-Tamimi and Gorgis (2007) indicate that code switching will remain a favourite linguistic choice especially for young people. They uncover that Romanized Jordanian Arabic is a new emerging code of electronic communication extensively used by first generation e-message senders, which could be described as a hybrid lingua franca or even a pidgin.

### **3. Methodology and the Corpus**

The data used in subsequent analysis were collected through interviews and observations. The collected messages for the subsequent analysis comprise more than 200 messages, posts and comments taken and printed from the profiles of 70 Jordanian university students. The students were very cooperative in providing us with their messages. All of the messages that were included in the data analysis were written by Jordanian university students. The students were assured that their messages will be only used for research purposes and their messages will be confidential and anonymous.

As far as the gender is concerned, the researcher was keen on collecting messages from both males and females. By so doing, we were able to uncover the effect of sex drawn from the two groups: males and females. These messages are mainly used among friends. It can be inferred, then, that the data are produced by a homogenous group who has the same cultural background and language knowledge. After collecting the messages, the researcher conducted some interviews with the subjects of this study.

To the researcher's best knowledge, there are no previous studies that have been conducted on the form of Facebook language from a sociolinguistic point of view. As a result, this motivates the researcher to investigate this topic from a sociolinguistic perspective.

#### *3.1 Methods of Data Collection*

As mentioned earlier, the data were collected by means of interviews. In addition to that, the researcher collected some data and messages from students' profiles. The researcher investigated the data and came up with some linguistic features that characterized this new genre of writing. The corpus of this study included graduates as well as undergraduates. The population of the study is a number of Jordanian university students. All of the students speak Arabic as their mother-tongue and English as a foreign language.

#### *3.2 Interviews*

The researcher conducted some interviews with the subject of this study to get more information. Each student was interviewed individually to elicit his opinion without being affected by other students. After conducting such interviews, it was evident that the students shared some linguistic characteristics that govern such a process of writing via Facebook.

### **4. Data Analysis**

With a little introspection of the data, we can observe that the majority of messages are written in English or Latinized Arabic due to the fact that they are presented by Roman or Latinized letters. Specifically, some messages are written in English, others in Latinized Arabic or in both English and Latinized Arabic. Many linguistic features have been founded in the collected data. The researcher had a thorough look at the messages

and noticed that there are some common linguistic features and functions used in the messages. It was also noticed that there are some common characteristics that are usually found in the data. For the purposes of this paper, five major features -namely, abbreviations, code switching, letter repetition (reduplication), Romanized Arabic, and neglecting the language rules- have been selected to be investigated thoroughly.

#### 4.1 Clippings and Abbreviations

It is clearly evident that the use of abbreviations and clipping is one of the major techniques used by the students in order to save time and effort. By such processes we mean that the writer seeks to shorten words and reduce them to one letter or few letters in writing. Interestingly enough, the most dominant feature of students writing via Facebook is the use of abbreviations. Additionally, the students assume that the Facebook abbreviations can easily be understood by both the recipient and the sender due to the fact that these abbreviations have become an essential part of Facebook language which is familiar and known to a great number of users. This fact was manifested by a male respondent who reported that “the Facebook language does not need to be learned; we can understand all of the abbreviations even if they are written or abbreviated in a strange way.” In this regard, it can be argued that this form of language is used for prestigious purposes which reflect students’ awareness of this new genre of writing. For more illustration, let’s consider the following two examples.

1) im **havin** exams. (having)

2) I am **gointo** ahmed. (going)

It can be inferred that the students may not only use such a strategy in order to save time or effort because they omit one single letter. It is probably that they also use such a strategy as a mark of prestige in order to show their linguistic choices. Therefore, the students use abbreviations mainly due to the fact that they facilitate the process of writing. A male respondent, for instance, has affirmed that “abbreviation is very helpful in writing; it enables us to write faster and it enables us as well to express our thought in few letters.” Another female student has clarified that “abbreviation is a kind of language simplification which helps us to exchange ideas faster”.

By way of illustration, observe following examples:

1) c u in Jordan; my dear (See you in Jordan, my dear)

2) man, r u in hurry? (Man, are you in hurry?)

3) Mbrook x for ursis (Congratulations x for your sister)

4) u r wlc all (You are welcome all)

5) wuts about u? (What is about you?)

Once again the above examples stress the fact that how the students use abbreviations and clipping in a way that enables them to save time and effort. It is worth mentioning here that the use of such clipping and abbreviations does not cause any ambiguity in communication. That is to say, the message can easily be conveyed and received. A male respondent, for instance, has reported that “I have never received a remark from my friend that indicates he does not understand what I have written.... even if we see the shortening for the first time, we can easily understand it.”

The following table will show some abbreviations and shortenings used by Jordanian students in Facebook.

Table 1. Examples of some abbreviations along with their English words & phrases

Abbreviation	Word or the phrase
c u	See you
4get	Forget
Ur	Your
Sis	Sister
Bro	Brother
Wlc	Welcome
Pic	Picture
Thx	Thanks
Plz	Please
Gr8	Great
L8r	Later

#### 4.2 Code Switching

The results of data analysis show that code switching appears to have been used heavily by the students. Code switching can best be described as a linguistic term that basically involves switching back and forth between two or more languages during communicating. Hence, code-switching occurs when a speaker substitutes a word (or phrase) from one language with a word or phrase from another language.

In the following examples, the students attempt to exploit this strategy efficiently.

1) hi everybody 2ed3oli bokra 3ndi presentation femadet research allahyostor o anakter 5ayfeh

(Hi everybody wish me good luck, tomorrow I have a presentation in the research course, May God help, I am so afraid)

2) samerplz bde email dryaser w ya ret law yndam la had algroup

(Samer, please I need doctor Yaser's email, and I wish he would join this group)

3) mar7aba X kefabde as2l 3n maw9'o3 n2l sh3bt el linguistics la class akbar.

(Hello x how are you? I want to ask about shifting the linguistics section to a larger class.)

4) wallah miss u kteer my classmates bn\$ooofkomyom el2a7d

(Really, I miss you so much my classmates. See you on Sunday)

In the above examples, we can see that code switching occurs from Romanized Arabic to English and vice versa at certain terms which are, in fact, largely related to the students' educational background. These terms are easier to be written in English language. In other words, they are said to be everyday university terms and the students hear such terms frequently. These findings seem to be in agreement with those of AL-Khatib & Sabbah (2008, p. 56) who observed that "the English-based academic atmosphere in Jordanian universities urges students to use English terms whenever talking about university and academic issues." Examples on such terms are words like (exam, linguistics, presentation, research, email, group, prof, department, class, second, ...ect.). It is suggested that these terms are better to be called "academic terms." These terms are preferably used by the students. This fact was manifested by a male respondent who reported that "I usually use English terms in my discourse because they are very common among my friends."

Another important point that can be observed from the above examples is that the students seek to use what is called the 'Romanized Jordanian Arabic' for code switching. In so doing, they are able to use some terms in an informal way such as -elrasi (on my head), ya 2aseal (son of a noble family), mar7ba wlk (Hello, man). This finding appears to be in line with the claim raised by Al Tamimi & Gorgis (2007) who assumed that Romanized Jordanian Arabic is a newly emerging code of electronic communication widely used by first generation e-mail senders. They added that it represents a colloquial and slang Jordanian Arabic, patios just like any other spoken Arabic diversity.

#### 4.3 Reduplication (Letter repetition)

Reduplication refers to the process whereby one letter of a word is repeated more than once in order to express an extra shade of meaning to that word. While examining data, it was seen that this technique was extensively used by the students. As a matter of fact, the reduplication is not used arbitrarily or without a particular aim or a specific purpose. Rather it is used in order to express an emphasis or to convey a particular feeling. As a result, the process of reduplication seems to be functional. More specifically, it tends to express a particular sense of feeling.

For more clarification, the examples below illustrate this phenomenon

1) veeeeeeeeery nice (very nice)

2) elfmbroooooook x 3gbal phd in shallah. (CongratulationsWish you get a doctorate degree soon God willing)

3) wlkwalla miss u soooooo much (You, I miss you so much)

4) niceeeeeee pic bs law 2nk m3na ya x (Nice picture! but if you were with us)

A close examination of the examples shows that the students usually prefer to reduplicate and repeat vowel. This comes from their English knowledge that only vowels are to be stressed. Consequently, all the reduplications occur at the level of vowels not consonants. Another remarkable point, as seen in the above examples, is that most of reduplications aim at intensifying and emphasizing a particular feeling. These results seem to sit well with Al-Khatib (2008). In example (1), for instance, the students want to describe something in an exaggerated form that is extremely nice. It is found that they can express this feeling in a fast and easy way just by

reduplicating the sound (e). The students didn't find any difficulty in writing the word "veeeeeeeeeeeeeeeery". They just kept the finger pressed on the key for few seconds. A student may write "iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiice" in a fast and easy way. A female respondent, for example, commented on this issue by saying that "this means that this is a huge nice not small nice. Saying nice by stressing (i) means that this is a full agreement which includes all the meanings of the word nice as well as to show an amiable feeling." In fact, she wants to say that reduplication enables us to show more emphasis on feelings.

#### 4.4 Romanized Arabic

Another remarkable observation made by this study is that the writers depend heavily on using Romanized Arabic. As a result, we can say that this feature is also considered one of the most prominent features of the Facebook language. A close examination of the data also shows that the students tend to use and exploit this strategy by replacing a sound by a numeral. It is clear that these numerals are carefully selected since they graphically approximate the corresponding Arabic letters in shape. The students use numerals mainly to indicate the representation of the orthography instead of representation of the phonetic transcription. (see Al-Khatib, 2008) For example, the word (nice) can be represented as "7elweh". The following table summarizes some special numerals as used in Romanized Arabic along with their Arabic equivalents.

Table 2. A list of the numerals as used in Romanized Arabic with their equivalence of Arabic letters

Numeral representation	Arabic letter	Example
5	خ	5air (fine)
2	ء	2nta (you)
9	ص	El9a7ra (desert)
7	ح	7yaty (my life)
6	ط	6olab (students)
3	ع	Bsr3a(quickly)
3'	غ	3'aib (absent)

For more clarification, notice the following examples

- 1) thx7abibi (thanks, my love)
- 2) lama2a7ki ma3ak (when I speak with you)
- 3) 7elwin ktir (you are very beautiful)

#### 4.5 Neglecting the Standard Rules of the Language

Another remarkable observation in this study is that the students do not pay a great attention to the grammatical and spelling rules when using Facebook. This does not mean that they are not quite aware of the language rules. Rather, they are aware of such language rules but they do not take care of them due to the fact that they want to express the message in a fast and easy way. Further, they think that these grammatical rules are not so important to the content of the message. That is to say, the message can be read clearly though it has some grammatical and spelling mistakes. This fact was also manifested by a male respondent who reported that "grammar is not so important to message content so whenever we can convey a message without following grammar rules we neglect these grammar rules." For more illustration, let us consider the following examples to notice how the writers neglect some grammar and spelling rules. More specifically, notice how the writer in example (1) left out the auxiliary "did". In addition, the writer omitted the verb "BE" in example (2). Also, we can see how the students are somewhat careless about capitalization and punctuation.

- 1) where u go???????? (Where did you go?)
- 2) i think there nithing worry about (I think there is nothing to worry about.)
- 3) wt will u do (What will you do?)
- 4) no one love u (No one loves you.)

These examples show that the students neglect grammar rules as in (4); the students do not pay attention to subject-verb agreement. Also, in examples (2) the students write the word "nothing" as "nithing"

### 5. Sociolinguistic Factors (Religion and Gender)

It is quite noticeable that the students are still quite aware of the cultural norms of society in which they live. That's to say, they are well-aware that there are certain restrictions imposed by the society such as gender and

religion.

### 5.1 Gender

Gender plays a key role in the form of Facebook language. More strictly speaking, the cultural norms and customs of the Arab world are more carefully followed by females than males. Additionally, females seem to be more conservative. Further, they seem to show more compliments as well as to pay more lip-services than males. Furthermore, they tend to use urban dialects like the word “*amaar*” instead of “*amar*”; they replace the voiced uvular plosive sound with the glottal plosive one. It was also observed that they use flattering remarks such as “*7bibty*”, “*7iaty*” and “*Amaar*”. Besides, they seek to flatter with each other by using pet names like “*soso*” as the writer did below in example (1). Consequently, having a thorough look at some Facebook posts or messages might give you an indication about the gender of the writer. By and large, females usually use different patterns of language. That is, they follow more prestigious and euphemistic form of language. They also apply conventional politeness in their posts and comments (See AL-Khatib, 2008).

To illustrate, consider the following examples

- 1) thanxx 7bibty soso mosta7eel nensakii (Thank you my love ,Salma, it is impossible to forget you)
- 2) Amaarallahymekiya 7iaty (Beautiful as moon! May Allah protect, my dear)
- 3) A7la wardehjalsh bet alward (You are the most beautiful rose sitting among roses)

Male writers, by contrast, seem to be simple and spontaneous. Furthermore, the males are characterized by their choice of topics such as sport, politics , and being ‘proud’ of having a heavy meal such as “*Mansef*” - the traditional Jordanian dish. Interestingly, they insult and underestimate each other in a form of joking and kidding just in order to create a funny atmosphere among each other (as shown below in example 3). It should be remembered here that males’ writings don’t always lack strategies such as the conventional politeness or euphemism; we can see that in their writings but such strategies are few if compared with females’ ones.

For more illustration, consider the following examples

- 1) Almnsf 9arjahztdalwshbab. (Come on folks “*Mansef*” is ready.)
- 2) shbabalmdredahyoom rae7 yenmase7 alaradfekum (Real Madrid fans you. are going to be wiping the floor with your bodies today?)
- 3) Wynkwyahamlya homeless 9arly sa3h bstnafykm. (Bums and homeless! Where are you? I have been waiting you for an hour.)

### 5.2 Religion

It is worthwhile to mention that the students pay a great attention to religion while writing the Facebook messages. The messages and posts are usually colored by religious expressions. More specifically, the students seek to use some religious terms such as “*inshallah*” (God Willing), “*allahyestor*” (May Allah help), “*allah y7mehk*” (May Allah Protect you). They always inject their messages with such religious terms due to the fact that they come to know that religion has a key role to play in communicating. It is clearly observed that such religious terms are mainly used by the student in Latinized Arabic but not in English. On the whole, the students tend to employ such emotional expressions as a reflection of their Islamic cultural background.

## 6. Conclusion

Based on the results of this investigation, many conclusions have been established. It has been shown that there are certain features- namely, abbreviations, shortenings, Latinized Arabic and code switching- used in the Facebook language. In fact, the main aim behind using such features is to save time and effort. Moreover, it was clear evident that the students do not pay a great attention to the language rules while writing messages via the Facebook. In other words, the students tend to ignore the grammatical and spelling rules to save effort and time due to the fact that such rules are not so important to the meaning of the message. This study has also proved the fact that the two sociolinguistic factors, religion and gender, were found to be playing a vital role in facebook language. Specifically, it has been observed that the messages are colored by the religious background of the students. In this regard, AL Khatib (2008, p. 11) added that “some of the e-mails are used as a means of communicating religious message of love and good wishes on certain social occasions”. The impact was also obvious regarding gender in that the females tend to be more restricted by social norms. They seem to be more conservative than males during their posts or comments.

Additionally, this study demonstrated that the students resort to code switching between English and Romanized Arabic or namely Jordanian Romanized Arabic while writing messages. As a matter of fact, the students resort to

code switching strategy due to certain factors, that is to say they seek to achieve simplicity and rapidity in writing. Moreover, it has been noticed that the students use code switching at certain English academic terms such as: exam, email, final, research, department, and course. Lastly, the current study shows that there are two opposite points of view about the language used in Facebook and SMS. The first point of view reveals that this new form of writing enriches the language since we can see new abbreviations and shortenings come into emergence. The second point of view says that such form of writing spoils the language. To put it differently, the language purists and conservatives consider this new genre of writing as a threatening element to language purity especially if it continues for a long period of time. (See AL-Tamimi & Gorgis, 2007). Although this new type of writing may be seen as a threatening element to language purity, Latinized Arabic will continue to be a suitable means of communication that is widely used in messages among friends.

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