

## A sociolinguistic probe of language use on Facebook among Algerian Internet users

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### Abstract

As Facebook has tremendously evolved into one of the best-liked ways of communication on the Internet, language has also been enticed in terms of its use and practices. This paper aims to raise its issue in the multilingual Arabic–French–English Facebook posts and comments from three purposely selected groups, comprising 40 participants each. The data were collected via an online questionnaire to explore the language(s) or language varieties used by the members in concordance with code-switching as a sociolinguistic phenomenon and the reasons behind such behaviour in online written discourse. The data were analysed through a mixed methods approach. The findings revealed that the participants of each selected group use a specific language or language that varies depending on the group membership, the language of the posts and the language they master best. Additionally, it was detected that most of the participants code-switch on Facebook either due to lack of fluency or to facilitate socialising.

Keywords: Code-switching, comments, Facebook, Internet users, language, posts;

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## 1. Introduction

Technology has become routine and has saturated people's lives from different age groups and gender (Eroglu, 2019; Keser & Semerci, 2019; Uzunboylu et al., 2022). The miscellaneous forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have drastically evolved in a very short time. As a result, the new phenomenon of 'interactive networking' consisting of human-to-human interactions across electronic networking systems (Herring, 2001) has altered at an outstanding rate how humans communicate with each other. Sociolinguistic research has yielded an important improvement in recent years; it has offered more exact descriptions and more practical analysis of language in its social contexts, and each language has its uniqueness and is considered a mirror of the society along with people who use it. Recent mediums such as Twitter, e-mail, texting and Facebook have opened the door to shorthand typing, abbreviations, emoticons and instant message lingo (texting language), causing some people to use different languages and language forms. Facebook, in particular, provides various weights to different behaviours to determine what to show on the user's screen.

Given the fact that multiple languages are available in the Algerian linguistic scene (Arabic, French, Tamazight and more recently English), people's tendency to use them on Facebook is not always the same. This depends on their fluency in the selected language to convey a certain message. And as a means of global communication, Facebook communication is having a great impact on language use. There is a boom not only in English language usage (Baron, 1998, 2010; Herring, 1996; 2001; Otanga & Aslam, 2020) but, potentially, in many other languages such as Arabic and French. The importance of this study lies in yielding an in-depth analysis of the languages or language varieties used by Algerian Internet users in their posts and comments on Facebook to check the way they affect their linguistic and social behaviour.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

#### 1.1.1. Definition of Facebook

Among several social networking sites, Facebook is the largest and the most universally used social networking site used by people of different ages, from children to adults. Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg under the alias 'The Facebook' in February 2004 (Facebook, 2011). As of the fourth quarter of 2020, Facebook had nearly 2.8 billion global monthly active users with a cumulative total of 3.3 billion users accessing any of the company's core products, i.e., Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Messenger, every month (Facebook, 2021). In preparation for being a member of Facebook, users start with registration, and then they can create a personal profile to interact with others, add new Facebook users as friends, exchange public or private online messages, express everyday interest, build solid connections and invite others to become a part of a community. The primary element of Facebook is a *wall* on which each user can create a *profile*. The wall is considered a web page involving personal information and a basic one; it also reveals photos, friends, likes and most importantly statuses. The *status* is an essential feature in Facebook and is used by users to inform others about what they are doing now, to explain what is happening to them, to focus on daily news and to ask questions or seek advice.

Most of the users of Facebook are teenagers and school-age youth. The language of the Facebook of late is in a state of flux. People use all forms of acronyms and neologisms to represent their ideas, opinions and messages (Nwala & Tamunobelem, 2019, p. 9). In terms of privacy issues, users can command who can have a look at their web page and how much information their friends can see by controlling their privacy settings. Additionally, Facebook members can establish and engage in communication as groups that can be formed on any subject, create invitations to events or post online notifications for meetings and other gatherings.

#### 1.1.2. Facebook behaviour (like, post and comment)

The goals of this study are to diagnose and investigate each Facebook user's behaviour. People join in communication on Facebook via three actions: like, post and comment. People's behaviour on

Facebook is dissimilar. They post a status, comment on another – using different languages or language varieties – or like the other. Facebook provides distinct significance to different behaviours to decide what to show on the user’s screen. This site has become a valued tool for communication in many people’s daily life. With Facebook, users can communicate through posts and messages; these posts can also be ‘liked’ and ‘commented on’ (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

Figure 1 shows an example of the different posts used by some Algerian facebookers. It clearly shows that different languages are used. These languages encompass Arabic, with its different forms, French and English. This study will provide data on what languages and language varieties are used by Algerian facebookers.



Figure 1. A sample of the posts used by Algerian facebookers

Park and Lee (2014) found that entertainment, self-expression and communication are the main reasons for using Facebook. Facebook comments play a vital role in influencing a reader’s perception of important discussions (Hong & Cameron, 2018). Comments are then users’ generated content published in fine lines under items posted by them. Facebook allows users to add comments on the shared post which can be viewed by all friends under the user’s friend list. Besides, there are some cases where comments are kept private by modifying comment settings in the user’s profile. Facebook comments allow ‘interpersonal dialogue between and among users and have offered new opportunities for individuals to connect with each other’ (Gilpin, 2010, p. 259).

### 1.1.3. Facebook language use

No one can deny the intricacy of the linguistic landscape of the Algerian community with the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Tamazight as the official languages, on the one hand, and French and English as first and second foreign languages, respectively, on the other. For many people, Facebook has become part of their everyday routine. This site is considered a multilingual environment, and is used to chat and follow the social activities of friends. This social networking site enables people’s language practice, exposure and communication, as already stated. The language used on Facebook is routinely informal and conversational. People write the way they speak and explicit writing styles have spread, shaped by the assets of individual communication features (post updates, comments, chat or private messages). Indeed, most people have learned how

to use individual features by trial and error or by asking friends and to take up specific protocols and writing styles by analysing comments written by others or copying their peers.

The coding for informal writing is recognised by, ‘visual cues: bold words, capital letters, emoticons, Netspeak spellings and photos/graphics’ (Meechai, 2010, p. 31). Para (2016, p. 193), another outstanding figure, uses the term ‘netspeak’ to refer ‘to speaking in ways used to converse text on the Internet; it is the special language, abbreviations and expressions used by users when communicating using the Internet’. The visual cues or the language of the Internet is informally used and its purpose is for fast writing (typing). Table 1 presents the common features of informal writing that are widely used on Facebook by Algerian Internet users. To identify the informal type of writing from the Facebook platform, these features were used while writing posts and comments.

Table 1. Features of informal texting

Features	Examples
Phonetic spelling used for transcription of Standard pronunciation	graav (grave), wanna (want)
Common shortenings and abbreviations used for saving time	mrc (merçi), c (c’est), b8 (bonne nuit)
Emoticons used for conveying a feeling	☹ sad ☺ happy
Expressing Arabic letters in numbers	2 means (أ), 3 (ع), 6 (ط), 7 (ح)

Moreover, when writing their comments on Facebook, people generally use a mixture of languages and codes to transmit a certain idea or message. Figure 2 shows an illustration of some comments written by some Algerian facebookers.



Figure 2. Instances of Facebook comments by Algerian facebookers

These two examples show that these facebookers use a mixture of codes: MSA and Algerian Arabic (AA), a form that pervades the tongues of all Algerian interlocutors, on the one hand, and English and French, on the other. The use of Romanised Arabic through the Latin script is crystal clear. Code-switching (CS) between French and MSA is also well-detected in the second example. This study will examine in depth the way facebookers write their posts and comments, in addition to the various languages and language forms used.

#### 1.1.4. The sociolinguistic phenomenon of CS

The term CS is the practice of selecting, alternating or mixing linguistic elements with two or

more codes to contextualise talk in interaction. Scotton (1993, p. 1) considers CS as 'alternations of linguistic varieties within the same conversation'. Along the same line and according to Bullock and Toribio (2009, p. xii), CS refers to 'the alternating use of two languages in the same stretch of discourse by a bilingual person'.

Being a community where a myriad of languages coexist, CS is a central aspect of language contact that predicts the sociolinguistic behaviour of most Algerian speakers. Because of some socio-historical factors, CS is usually between Arabic in its two forms MSA and AA (and/or Berber), and French. In Algeria, it is easy to notice the switching between one code and another by near exposure to a natural and spontaneous conversation or by analysing some typed comments or messages when Algerian Internet users interact with each other.

Moreover, many Algerians consider French as the language of civilisation and prestige. Consequently, they sometimes switch consciously and on purpose to French to sound more 'civilised'. Expression such as 'c'est bon', 'normal', 'ça y'est', 'déjà' have become part of the Algerian verbal repertoire. New items like *flexy*, *connecter* and *taper* are excessively used nowadays, especially by youth and teenagers due to the development of technology.

#### 1.1.5. CS in CMC

In a study on CS in Facebook posts that was carried out by Halim and Maros (2014), they took five Malay-English bilingual users as a sample for their study, and data were gathered and analysed according to Gumperz's theories, along with recent studies related to this subject. The results revealed that CS takes place in Facebook status updates and wall posts for reasons like emphasising an idea, message clarification, qualification of the message or indicating emotions. The present paper scrutinises the different languages used by Algerian Facebook users and checks the way these languages are used in their written posts and comments.

#### 1.2. Purpose of the study

The principal purpose of this study lies in scrutinising language use by Algerian Internet users on Facebook with a special focus on their interactive networking through comments and posts, and the reasons behind shifting from one language/variety to another. Such considerations have led to some of the questions being formulated as follows:

Q1- What language or language variety do Internet users (facebookers) use on Facebook when typing their posts and comments?

Q2- Why do Internet users code-switch on Facebook?

To answer the aforementioned research questions, the following hypotheses are put forward:

H1- Algerian facebookers use a mixture of Standard Arabic and AA, on the one hand, and French and AA, on the other.

H2- Algerian Internet users code-switch on Facebook because they lack fluency in the languages used.

To provide answers to the aforementioned research questions, and test the proposed hypotheses, an online questionnaire was used (also see Appendix 1). The sample of this study will be a purposive sampling consisting of 40 members who belong to 3 different Facebook groups. The data will be analysed based on the 'mixed methods approach', including both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. Participants

The participants of this study are members of three different groups. The first group called 'Master 2 LS (2020-2021)' consists of 109 students who possess a Facebook account. These university

students are from the Department of English. This is a discussion group created by two master's EFL students to share information about all updates. The second group named 'S.O.S l'antiquité Tlemcen l'authenticité' embroils 61,037 participants and the third group called 'نادي الأساتذة الجامعيين الجزائريين' (Algerian University Teachers Club) encompasses 1,209 participants. Because of the extensive number of members belonging to each group, and as some of them were not interested in participating in this survey, we decided to submit the questionnaire to a smaller sample consisting of 40 participants from each group. The choice of these participants and groups was done on purpose to delve into the amount of Arabic, French and English used among them. It is noteworthy to mention that a purposive sample is a non-probability sample that is selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study. The age of the participants in the selected groups ranges between 22 and 70 years.

## 2.2. Research instruments

The original version of the questionnaire used in this study is in English and it has been translated into Arabic and French to facilitate the task to the participants and to avoid any bias or ambiguity. The participants, of each selected group, were asked to complete an online questionnaire embracing different questions using Google Forms. The most important ones are presented here.

## 3. Results

The data obtained from the online questionnaire are presented in this section in tables.

### 3.1. Q1: Which language do you master best?

Table 2. Language fluency via Facebook

	Arabic	French	English
G1=40/100%	12=30%	2=5%	26=65%
G2=40/100%	10=25%	28=70%	2=5%
G3=40/100%	32=80%	7=17.5%	1=2.5%

When asked about the language they master best, the majority of participants (65%) in G1 said English, while 30% claimed Arabic and only 2 (5%) participants replied that the language they control better is French, as also seen in Table 2. As far as G2 is concerned, 28 participants (70%) revealed that French is the language they master best, whereas 10 (25%) participants opted for Arabic and only 2 (5%) participants claimed that it is English. As for G3, Arabic got the highest score with 32 (80%) participants, while only 7 (17.5%) participants chose French and only 1 (2.5%) participant selected English.

### 3.2. Q2: Which language or language variety do you understand better?

Table 3 clearly shows the degree of comprehension of the languages at play among the selected Algerian Internet users.

Table 3. The understanding level of languages among facebookers

	Arabic	French	English
G1=40/100%	18=45%	4=10%	18=45%
G2=40/100%	15=37.5%	25=62.5%	0
G3=40/100%	35=87.5%	3=7.5%	2=5%

The data gathered in Table 3 indicates that the most commonly understood languages among the G1 participants are Arabic(45%), followed by English (45%), students from the English department,



and French (10%). 2.5% of the participants in G2 revealed that the language they understand better is French, followed by Arabic and English, which is not understood. As for the last group, G3, the majority of participants (87.5%) reported understanding better Arabic, while French and English were nearly not understood (7.5% and 5%, respectively).

**3.3. Q3: Which language or language variety do you think is more appropriate to write your posts and comments?**

Table 4. The appropriate language to write posts and comments

	MSA	AA	French	English
G1=40/100%	5=12.5%	1=2.5%	0	34=85%
G2=40/100%	3=7.5%	7=17.5%	29=72.5%	1=2.5%
G3=40/100%	35=87.5%	0	0	5=12.5%

Regarding the third question, the participants were asked to report their opinion concerning the most suitable language or language variety when writing their posts and comments. Table 4 highlights that 35 (85%) participants from G1 rating showed their support for the English language, whereas only 12.5% selected MSA and no one selected French. As for G2, 29 (72.5%) participants opted for French, while only 7 (17.5%) participants found that AA is the most appropriate variety to be used. Concerning the last group, G3, the majority of participants (35 teachers, 87.5%) selected MSA, while the rest 12.5% reported that English is the most appropriate language to be used on Facebook. It is worth mentioning that most of the respondents of this particular group are Algerian university teachers.

**3.4. Q4: To what extent do you switch between languages when typing your posts and comments on Facebook?**

Table 5. The use of CS in Facebook communication

	Always code-switch	Do not/rarely code-switch
G1=40/100%	28=70%	12=30%
G2=40/100%	32=80%	8=20%
G3=40/100%	5=12.5%	35=87.5%

Regarding the fourth question, the participants were asked about the extent to which they code-switch when writing their posts and comments. This is one of the most interesting items of the questionnaire since we aimed to detect whether these participants switch back and forth between the languages at play or not. Table 5 clearly shows that the majority of the respondents from G1 (70%) switch between different languages/language varieties when typing their posts and comments to facilitate comprehension, whereas only 30% do not. Others explained that as they sometimes do not find the accurate words to express their ideas, so they automatically switch between languages. Moreover, the findings obtained from G2 revealed that 32 (80%) participants always code-switched.

The following are some of the statements provided by the participants of G1 and G2:

- 'It comes as a natural behaviour and lack of vocabulary'.
- 'Since I speak more than one language, sometimes I feel that expressing myself in another language is easier than the other one and vice versa'.
- 'Sometimes there is a lexical gap which causes CS'.
- 'It provides me with a feeling of self-confidence and makes me very comfortable when writing my comments'.
- 'I shift from AA to French to facilitate the understanding of my message'.

- 'CS is inevitable. I find it easier to express myself this way'.
  - 'I've been accustomed to this act and this facilitates communication and comprehension between us'.
  - 'Sometimes I feel unable to translate some words or expressions from my idiolect since this latter is full of French words, so to facilitate the comprehension of my message, I keep it the way it is, and it is well-known that CS is a widespread phenomenon among Algerians because of multilingualism'.

However, the results provided by the last group demonstrate that the majority of respondents (87.5%) do not or rarely code-switch between languages on Facebook when writing their posts and comments. They insisted on the fact that the use of Arabic–French is degrading today, while only a minority (5, 13%) answered with 'I code-switch'.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study has been conducted to determine the language or language variety used on Facebook by Algerian Internet users when writing their posts and comments. The results obtained revealed that out of the three groups under scrutiny, G1 used English more than any other language or language variety; this is explained by the fact that this category of the respondents includes students and teachers of English, the language of their studies, so they try to write their posts and comments in this specific language to ameliorate their level (Jahangard, Rahimi, & Norouzizadeh, 2020; Shelenkova & Zhrebayeva, 2019). Additionally, being a member of this group provides them with the opportunity to use English more than any other group. The findings also revealed that the respondents used a mixture of English and AA or English and MSA to express solidarity between them or to facilitate comprehension of their comments.

As far as G2 is concerned, the findings showed that the language widely used by the respondents is French; this is because this group encompasses members of the so-called 'old generation', i.e., members who were extensively influenced by the French language during and after colonisation. It was also noticed that a large number of participants, who belong to this group, code-switch between French and AA to write their comments. Another important finding relates to the fact that, because the post is written in French, the participants automatically reply in French and sometimes in both French and AA using the Latin script. When using this script, it seems to them like they are writing their posts in French.

As far as G3 is concerned, the participants claimed to use MSA mostly. However, some incorporated AA in their comments, although to a lesser extent compared with MSA. English is also used by minority respondents since this group includes Algerian university teachers who may show some fluency in English. Furthermore, in terms of mastery of the language, G1 opted for English, and this seems quite evident since this is the language of their studies; as for G2, they selected French; this is because the participants of this group have been more influenced by the French colonisers than the other group members; and finally, G3 chose Arabic because the majority of participants of this specific group write their posts and comments in this language. From this interpretation, the first hypothesis posits that 'depending on the content of the post, Algerians use a mixture of Standard Arabic and AA, on the one hand, and French and AA, on the other. English is also used to a much lesser extent and has been validated. This is similar to the findings of Vitulyova (2020).

As for the second research question that tries to answer the reasons why Internet users' code-switch on Facebook, the respondents from G1 and G2 relate to them mainly to a lack of vocabulary. Being a multilingual person is another reason for CS. Still, other reasons for CS relate to self-confidence and comfort and the easiness of writing their posts and comments. However, the respondents from G3 admitted to rarely or not shifting at all between languages, and that they select only one language when typing their comments. MSA is the most widely used among this group of intellectuals, although AA is also used to a lesser extent. Diglossia, bilingualism and their inevitable outcome known as CS are inevitable sociolinguistic phenomena within the Algerian linguistic



landscape. It seems that Algerians cannot stick to only one language when speaking or writing their comments. This is why CS is omnipresent not only in their verbal expressions but also in their writings.

## 5. Conclusion

This study has tried to investigate the language or language variety used by Algerian Internet users on Facebook with a special focus on their interactive networking through comments and posts. It has also attempted to find out the reasons why they switch from one language/variety to another. The conclusions we can draw from this study can be summarised under several points. First, in terms of language use, the findings of this study have revealed that each group relies on the use of a particular language or language varies depending on the context of the group itself and the post.

Another interesting result that has emerged from this study relates to the fact that CS is inevitable among the three groups, although it occurs to a lesser extent among G3 participants. The participants of the present study switched back and forth between English and AA, English and MSA, French and AA, and sometimes between MSA and AA, mainly because they lack fluency in a certain language or language variety (MSA, AA or French) and to facilitate the comprehension of their message and thus enhancesocialising with members of the same group.

The current research work has some limitations because of the indeterminateness of the population of Facebook posts and comments. The sample size is also relatively small. This may limit any conclusiveness about the results obtained. This gap may allow another piece of research to see the extent to which the findings and conclusions of the present study can be detected among other Facebook groups and pages to have a deeper understanding and scrutiny of the languages used and the reasons for their usage among other Algerian Internet users scattered throughout the country.

As multilingualism is a pervasive sociolinguistic phenomenon among Algerians, it is highly recommended to conduct further research through other Facebook posts to scrutinise which suitable language or language variety should be used within this context or whether the use of multiple languages remains the best strategy for Algerians to communicate via Facebook.

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## Appendix 1

### Online Questionnaire to Algerian Facebookers

For a research project about language use on Facebook, you are kindly invited to invest a few minutes of your valuable time to answer this questionnaire.

1. Which language do you master best?  
Arabic    French    English
2. Which language do you understand better?  
Arabic    French    English
3. Which language or language variety do you think is more appropriate to write your posts and comments?  
MSA        AA        French        English
4. To what extent do you switch between languages when typing your posts and comments on Facebook?  
-Always code-switch  
-Do not/rarely code-switch  
Why?

.....  
.....