

## Insights into the Linguistic Practices of Algerians On Facebook Pages

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This paper aims to explore Algerian Facebook users' language choices on one selected Facebook page. It seeks to investigate whether Facebook users - in writing their comments, choose to accommodate to the linguistic choices of post writers. It adopts the responsive and imitative design to analyse a corpus of 10 posts and 1157 comments extracted from an Algerian Facebook page nicknamed Pleasure. Analysis illustrates how Facebook users mostly converge to the use of French and English while diverging from using Modern-Standard Arabic in casual topics.

### 1. Introduction

Most published work that investigated the multilingual context of Algeria focused on spoken discourse as a main source for data (e.g. Bagui, 2014; Benguedda, 2015; Chemami, 2011; Mostari, 2009). However, there is a recent shift of attention—in the sociolinguistic field, to investigating data from a different genre of discourse, mainly that which is mediated through computers (Androutsopolous, 2013). Although, such discourse was first believed to be quite homogeneous and English-centred, it was found that it is not. This is because in recent years more Languages, even only spoken ones, were introduced to it (Lee, 2016). Hence, new multilingual data is available for research in computer-mediated discourse and topics relating to multilingualism and language contact begun being investigated (e.g. Barasa, 2016; Dąbrowska, 2013; Eldin, 2014; Halim & Maros, 2014; Sophocleous & Themistocleous, 2014). However, few if any studies investigated these interests with regard to the Algerian context and in an attempt to bridging this gap, this study is interested in exploring how the multilingualism of Algerians is performed in such discourse. Facebook was selected as a source of computer-mediated discourse data, because at the onset of the study, it was found to be the most used social media platform by Algerians (Boumarafi, 2015).

### 2. Background

Algeria presents a diglossic speech community due to the co-existence of the two different but genetically related codes, namely Algerian-Arabic and Modern-Standard Arabic. Algerian-Arabic is a spoken code that is the mother tongue of 70% of Algerians whereas Modern-Standard Arabic is the official code used for writing and education (Chemami, 2011). Algeria can be considered a multilingual community as well and that is due to the presence of French and English as the first and second foreign languages respectively. Some brief insights into the Algerian linguistic context with regard to these two foreign languages are presented in the subsections below.

French was introduced to Algeria during the French colonialisation, and its linguistic presence was strong to such an extent that it lasted even after Algeria's independence. The French colonialisation in Algeria lasted for about 132 years throughout which colonial France implemented deracination and deculturization policies that targeted the Islamic and Arabic identities of Algerians (Benrabah, 2014). It established French as the language of instruction

instead of Arabic, and targeted schools that taught Arabic and ultimately closed them (Boutelis, 2014). Statistics show that after independence, only 300,000 Algerians out of a population of 10 million were competent in Modern-Standard Arabic, six million spoke French and one million could read it (Benrabah, 2007).

English was introduced to Algerian educational system by authorities as an attempt to replace and mitigate the domination of French. English is a de-ethnized language—for Algerians at least—because it is not tainted with a colonial history, as is the case for French (Bensafi, 2002). However, the status of the English language is far from replacing that of French in Algeria as according to Benrabah (2014) French would decline in Algeria and be replaced by English if the economy of Algeria is integrated into the English-speaking world. In other words, if English becomes the language of economy, this would present situations for increasing its daily use.

Indeed, the literature shows that French is present in the speech of Algerians (Mostari, 2011) and that Algerians frequently switch to it in their daily oral communications (Bagui, 2014) and use it in text messages (Mostari, 2009). However, English was found to be used rarely or very rarely in Algerians' speech (Chemami, 2011) and their texts (Mostari, 2009). As for these languages' use online - namely on Facebook, results of a preliminary study show that French was used in writing 17% of collected Facebook comments whereas English was used for writing only 4% of them (Abdelhamid 2018). Intrigued by these results, this paper is interested in exploring whether Algerians negotiate the use of these languages online and precisely on Facebook pages. In other words, do they accept the use of any given language online and adapt it themselves or do they change to other ones. The framework used to achieve this aim is presented in the next section.

### **3. Responsive and Initiative design**

This paper adopts the responsive and initiative design by Androutsopoulos (2014) which was developed based on the framework of the Audience design by Bell (1984). Bell's framework proposes that in any communicative event, the speaker chooses and designs their style of speech according to their audience (Bell, 1984). Speakers could choose to speak in accordance to the expectations of the audience, as dictated by the topic of discussion and situation at hand, to have a responsive style. Alternatively, speakers may choose to initiate a style that does not necessarily stand to the expectations of the audience, but which redefines the current situation (Bell, 2009). Although the primary work of Bell (1984) focused on style in relation to phonological variables, he maintains that the model could be extended to include language choice as a form of style as well.

Building upon these ideas, Androutsopolous (2014) introduced the concept of responsive and initiative design to the social media context. According to Androutsopoulos (2014), before posting on Facebook, users tend to take their Facebook audience into account when making their linguistic choices. These Facebook users could use a code that is intelligible to all of their Facebook friends and hence maximizing their audience or choose to use a code that only few of their Facebook friends know, minimizing the audience. Correspondingly, Facebook friends of post writers could choose the same code when writing their comments, implicating that they agree on their choice and reinforce it by using it themselves, or diverge from this choice by initiating the use of a different code, which they deem more appropriate. Androutsopoulos' (2014) analysis illustrates how both Facebook users who initiate the posts and those who write comments to them are aware of their audience and their linguistic competences and they choose relevant codes to manifest that. Interviews by Berni-Smith (2016) with social media users also revealed that before posting online, users consider their code choice which is also reflective of their identity constructions. Participants to Berni-Smith's (2016) study were four young

Chinese Indonesians whose mother tongue is Teochew, an ethnic dialect, and who speak Indonesian and English. Two participants were constantly using Indonesian on Facebook because their Facebook audience is an Indonesian speaking audience while the other two participants used English although most of their Facebook friends do not speak it. In doing so, the latter of these are highlighting their personal identities as opposed to any other ethnic ones.

Based on the findings that social media users show awareness to linguistic usage (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Berni-Smith, 2016), this paper adopts the same responsive and initiative design but to the context of Facebook pages. The purpose is to investigate whether followers would be responsive to the administrators' use of Modern-Standard Arabic, French and English or would they use different codes. The audience for which these posts are written is the group of members of the page - that is, the Facebook users who liked the page and who get notifications whenever the administrator posts something (they are referred to here as 'followers'). Only administrators could post on this Facebook page and these posts are initiators in terms of which codes are used in writing them. Comments by followers on the other hand could be responsive to this code choice, in that, they could be converging when sharing the same code choice or diverging when using a different code. This last case of divergence represents an attitude towards the used codes. In other words, if the comment writer is responding and discussing the same topic as in the post but using a different code, this suggests that they deny the use of the codes in discussing the topic and are using the code they deem more appropriate by redefining the linguistic situation.

#### **4. Data Collection and Analysis**

The findings presented in this paper are part of a wider study that is interested in the frequency of codeswitching on comments to Facebook posts on two Algerian Facebook pages. Data for this paper consist of ten Facebook posts extracted from an Algerian Facebook page nicknamed Pleasure. This page was selected, firstly, because of its popularity among Algerian Facebook users (it has more than 1.7 million Facebook followers), and secondly, because of its public status and finally because of the observation that more than one code are used on it. The purpose of this page is entertainment, that is, it is focused on giving pleasure to its followers through posting jokes and funny pictures and videos. The ten posts were selected from a collected data set that included 60 posts, which were posted over the course of two days that preceded the date of beginning of data collection process. These posts were selected because administrators used language to open a discussion with followers. Hence, providing followers with a chance to use language as opposed to emoji for example. The chain of comments underneath each one of the posts were extracted using the software Facepager. This yielded a corpus of 1157 comments where the focus of the analysis is on comments written in single codes only. To analyse the linguistic responsiveness, the code choice of each comment was determined and quantified. When the majority of the comments are written in the same code as the post, this implies convergence to language choice whereas if the followers chose other codes, this implies a negotiation of code-choice and an initiative act.

#### **5. Results and discussion**

This section presents some selected extracts from the data with the aim of illustrating linguistic responsiveness and reporting some cases of initiative acts. Table 1 displays information about the ten selected posts. It shows the codes that were used in writing the posts and gives the numbers of comments written underneath them in Algerian-Arabic (AA), Modern-Standard Arabic (MSA), French (FR) and English (ENG).

Post number	Codes used in initial posts by administrators	Codes used in writing comments by followers									
		AA		MSA		FR		ENG		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Post1	FR	21	15%	3	2%	108	77%	8	6%	140	100%
Post2	FR	28	29%	3	3%	56	59%	8	8%	95	100
Post3	FR	10	71%	0	0%	4	29%	0	0%	14	100%
Post4	FR	15	12%	0	0%	106	83%	6	5%	127	100%
Post5	MSA	45	37%	27	22%	36	30%	13	11%	121	100%
Post6	FR	41	22%	3	2%	120	66%	19	10%	183	100%
Post7	FR	9	53%	0	0%	8	47%	0	0%	17	100%
Post8	FR	64	44%	8	6%	63	43%	10	7%	145	100%
Post9	ENG	4	4%	1	1%	1	1%	107	95%	113	100%
Post10	FR	46	23%	12	6%	136	67%	8	4%	202	100%

Table 1. Codes choice in posts and comments.

Data from this table reveals that the choice of codes used in writing the comments is mostly responsive to that of administrators who wrote the posts. For example, in the case of Post 1 which was written in French, 108 (77%) comments out of 140 comments were written entirely in French. Writers of these comments were responsive in their code choices and they converged to the administrator's choice of using French. In each of the examples throughout the paper, the first line is dedicated for the post and the successive lines are a number of selected comments were 'C1' stands for first comment. Translation in English is presented in brackets underneath each line and cases of codeswitching are marked by bold text. Algerian-Arabic is presented in normal text, French is underlined, English is in Italics and Modern-Standard Arabic is both underlined and in Italics.

*Example 1*, Post 1 and comments.

1. Est-ce que les algériens ont toujours des arrières pensées 🤔?  
[Do Algerians always have ulterior motives?]
2. **C1:** les algériens ont un esprit tordu. venez pas m'insulter c'est la vérité.  
[Algerians have a twisted mind. Do not insult me it is the truth.]
3. **C2:** Les algériens ont meme des arrières pensées pour les arrières pensées 😊  
[Algerians have ulterior motives for the ulterior motives]
4. **C3:** mdddr comme moi maintenant xD TAG , esprit tordu 😊😊😊  
[Lool just like me at the moment xD, twisted mind]
5. **C4:** Oh que oui ! Quand je parle avec ma mère elle n'a que ça  
[oh That is true! When I talk to my mother she only has this]
6. **C5:** واش قصدك بالسطا تو هذا؟؟ نجي نكسرلك راسك  
[What do you mean by this status?? I will come to break your head]

Post 1 is a question by the administrator to the followers about a stereotypical trait of Algerians —'having ulterior motives'. The followers are asked to comment whether they think the stereotype of Algerians having ulterior motives is correct. Example 1 provides five selected comments, the content of which show the most frequently raised ideas in the chain of comments to this post. The majority of comments as in lines (2), (3), (4) and (5) approve that Algerians have ulterior motives and used French in expressing their ideas. The writer of comment 1 expressed that this is the truth and asked other followers not to insult her for admitting this.

Writers of comments 2, 3 and 4 went even further to make fun of this matter saying, for example, that Algerians have ulterior motives for their own ulterior motives, line (3), or that they themselves or someone they know do have ulterior motives, lines (4) and (5). The writer of comment 5, on the other hand, denied this and rejected the post of the administrator. They asked the administrator what they meant by this post and they were furious and wrote that they were going to assault the administrator. What is interesting is that this disagreement in opinion was reflected in code choice as well. When most comments that agreed with the post were written in French, this comment was written in Algerian-Arabic. Divergence from the code choice of the administrator to discuss this matter reflects disapproval with the issue of discussion as well as change of definition of the situation at hand. When French has a formal connotation to it, Algerian-Arabic is the code used in informal settings (Ahmed-Sid, 2008). Raising a fight with the administrator in this sense necessitates a redefinition of the linguistic situation by diverging from the choice of using ‘formal’ French to initiating the use of ‘informal’ Algerian-Arabic.

This act of linguistic divergence is also the case for Posts 3 and 8 (examples 2 and 3 below), which were written in French, but most writers of the comments did not converge to the same code choice, but they chose Algerian-Arabic instead. Firstly, in the case of Post 3, the administrator asked the followers in French whether they have any food recipes to share. There were only few comments to this post, the majority of which were written in Algerian-Arabic. The use of French was not converged to in commenting to this post, which could relate to how Algerian-Arabic, rather than French, is associated with Algerians’ ethnic culture that includes naming dishes and describing their preparation. Using Algerian-Arabic in this sense permits expressing this cultural identity. Most comments as in lines (2), (3) and (4) in Example 2 below did not have a serious tone. Writers of these comments highlighted the common practice of eating bread in almost every meal in Algerian culture in a jocular tone. They described the straightforward habit of eating bread with tomatoes or cheese (Lines (2) and (4) respectively) as sophisticated recipes that need to have a list of ingredients and a method of preparation. Writer of comment 2, on the other hand, raised a different issue that relates to French fries. French fries are notorious in Algerian culture as an easy dish that could be prepared by anyone. When the person in line (3) wrote that they know how to make French fries, they are jokingly implying that this is the only thing they could prepare and that they are the wrong person to be asked to share recipes.

#### *Example 2, Post 3.*

1. Coucou l'équipe, Y a t-il des recettes à partager!  
[Hi guys, do you have any recipes to share!]
2. **C1:** المقادير : نص خبزة و حبة طماطم و كيلة ملح. طريقة التحضير : قطع الطماطم و دبرها : بالطوماطيش خبز: فالخبز بشوية ملح  
[Bread with tomatoes: Ingredients: half loaf of bread and one tomato and pinch of salt. Method of preparation: cut the tomatoes and put it inside the bread with a bit of salt]
3. **C2:** نعرف ليفريت خخخخخ  
[I know French fries hahahaha]
4. **C3:** الخبز و حط الفرماجات و المقادير : نص خبزة و الفرماج قدما تقدر 2 ولا 3 طريقة التحضير : افتح .. خبز بالفرماج كووول ملاحظة : الفرماج نحولو الغلاف و شكرا خخخخ  
[Bread with cheese .. ingredients: half a loaf of bread and cheese triangles as many as you like, 2 pieces or 3. Method of preparation, cut the bread open and put the cheese and eaaat. NB: don't forget to uncover the cheese triangles and thank you hahahaha]

Next, in Post 8, example 3, the administrator asked the followers to comment on a screenshot of a chat between a couple that they shared. The administrator wrote the phrase ‘À vos claviers’ in French translated to ‘to your keyboards’ to ask the followers of the page to write comments about the screenshot. The screenshot depicts a chat of three conversational turns between a girlfriend and a boyfriend. The girlfriend in the first turn expresses how sorry she is for being late in replying to her boyfriend because she was out. The boyfriend becomes angry with her. He asks her to get permission from him before going out in the future, written in codeswitching between Algerian-Arabic and French. However, the girlfriend sends a photo of her hand where there are question marks on her ring finger. This photo sends an implied message of ‘since we are not engaged, I am not compelled to get permission from you’. This post is composed in two codes, namely French, which is used by the administrator and in the chat, and Algerian-Arabic, which is used in the chat. Table 1 above also reveals that Algerian-Arabic and French are the most used codes in writing comments to this post. The percentage of comments written in Algerian-Arabic slightly exceeds that of comments written in French, 44% and 43% respectively.

*Example 3, Post 8.*

1. À vos claviers !  
[To your keyboards !]



[Sorry I went out for shopping with a friend I am just back home]

[Oh really?? And without telling me!!]

[Next time tell me before going out okay]



It is obvious in this case that most comments' writers are negotiating the code-choice of the administrator. This could be explained by the association of Modern-Standard Arabic to the educational and formal settings in Algeria that the majority of followers opted to use the mother tongue Algerian-Arabic in discussing their dreams. The use of French is also, less formal and could be adopted to such topics (Ahmed-Sid, 2008). Both comments 1 and 4 in example 4 are written in Algerian -Arabic while comments 2 and 3 are written in French.

Lastly, the only post that was written in English is Post 9, example 5. The administrator asked the followers to speak about themselves as if they are in a job interview. It was found that most followers converged to the use of English. However, one Facebook user was actually against the use of English and they explicitly expressed their attitudes through both using words and language, line (5) in example 5. They wrote the comment starting in English to address the use of English in the post explaining that they wish to write in Arabic and then switched to Modern-Standard Arabic to explain the reason for that. What is interesting is that they wrote both English words and Modern-Standard Arabic words in Arabic characters. This could hint that although this person has written the first part of their comment in English, it is not a message directed to the English monolingual population, it is, however, designed for bilingual speakers of Arabic and English and most precisely, those who could read Arabic. This could carry a message of 'when you are perfectly capable of reading these Arabic letters, why are not you using Arabic instead of English?' Using codes for addressivity is a practice that was also reported by Seargeant, Tagg, and Ngampramuan (2012) in their study of Thai speakers. Their analysis showed how one participant used Thai script to write about London related information. This has permitted her to direct her messages to Thai reading community that lived in London.

*Example 5, Post 9.*

1. Tell me about yourself? 😊  
its a job interview question 😊
2. **C1:** I'll tell what, if this was a movie and you'r chosing actors i will defenently be your star and if it is a football game then iam messi ;-)
3. **C2:** I had that kind of question in my job interview :p just change je subject and you'll get the job
4. **C3:** I don't think that it would be wise to tell stuf about yourself to Algerians and especialy in facebook.
5. **C4:** كان اي رايت ان ارايبك ؟ انغليش لغة الكفار  
[Can I write in Arabic? English is the language of disbelievers]

Comments on Post 9 are long stretches of language use that implicate the followers' ability to use English, lines (2), (3) and (4). There are some examples where a switch occurred from English to Algerian-Arabic in the comments to post 9. The analysis reveals that the switch in these cases is intentional and it serves the 'specific vocabulary' function of codeswitching. According to Dabrowska (2013), a switch occurs for specific vocabulary if there are no words or phrases that carry the exact cultural, religious and/or functional equivalents. In post 9, the fans were asked to write about themselves as if in a job interview. Some fans replied to this post in humorously referring to the problem of nepotism whenever recruiting new employers in some administrative sectors in Algeria, lines (1) and (2) in example 6. They deliberately used the Algerian-Arabic term 'Flan' translated to 'that person' to refer to the person who supposedly send them and assured the job for them. The use of this term is culturally exclusive and is used to refer to the problem jokingly so only Algerians could relate to this joke. In the third line of the example, the writer used Arabic letters to write about herself mentioning that



she will sit for exam next week (and is hoping for success for herself) and switched to Arabic to include the religious expression ‘if God wills’ that is used by Muslims when speaking about future events.

*Example 6. Codeswitching for specific vocabulary.*

1. *No experiences , No diploma ( yet ) , no intelligence :p , Can't do nothing but " fln " sent me here ! Is it enough ? ( it's the way we get the job in Algeria )*
2. *If u want the job, just say: He sent me to you ( فلان بعثني ليك ) nd u will be the future PDG (🇩🇿🇩🇿)*
3. *سو اي هالب ماي موم ان بربارينف بوراك هههههه لوف ماي سالف اند ماي مودر اي دونت هاف اني سيسترز اند نو نيد فور ذام اي ا هاف باك افزام نيس ويك اي هوب اي ويل باس ات (🇩🇿) ان شاء الله ..  
[I love myself and my mother I do not have any sisters and no need for them so I help my mom in preparing Bourak hhhh I have BAC exam this week I hope I will pass it **If God wills**]*

In a nutshell, this section illustrated the linguistic practices of followers of page Pleasure. It demonstrated how disagreement in opinion and adoption of different tones is reflected in divergence in code choice. It revealed that French use is widely accepted on Facebook. It also revealed that Facebook users mostly converge to the use of English which could support the hypothesis formulated by Benrabah (2014) that English use in Algeria will increase if there are more opportunities for its use like in post 9.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper presents an attempt to investigate language use on Facebook pages. Analysis followed the responsive and initiative design to explore whether followers of page Pleasure would use the same codes used by administrators. Results revealed that generally followers do not favour the use of Modern-Standard Arabic on Facebook to discuss casual topics. French is widely used in the data and followers do not seem to have negative attitudes towards its use as most of them adopted French in their comments to posts initiated in French. Finally, the use of English is also responsive, that is, followers use English to respond to posts written in English. However, despite having shown ability to use English, followers do not tend to initiate its use in posts that are not written in English.

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