

## ***Use of Arabic in Computer-Mediated Communication***

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### **Abstract**

*During the last few decades and especially since the 1990s, Western-invented text communication technologies have become increasingly prevalent in the Arab world such as personal computers, the World Wide Web, e-mail, bulletin boards, Internet Relay Chat, instant chat, and mobile phone text messaging. Most of these technologies originally were designed to incorporate the ASCII keypads. As a result, Arabic speaking internet users communicate in these technologies by transliterating the Arabic-version text into French/English using the ASCII-forms. To overcome the Arabic letters that do not have an approximate phonetic equivalent in the ASCII script or phones, numerals, that graphically approximate the Arabic letter, are used instead. There is, however, no agreed name for this type of transliteration, yet some people dare to call it Arabic Chat Alphabet while others use the blend word Arabish.*

The first thing that imposes itself in the present paper is to clear the ground and to start by providing a definition of the term ‘*computer-mediated communication*’. As for the two other terms ‘*linguistic integration*’ and ‘*globalization process*’, they will round off the conclusion of this paper. The term computer-mediated communication, more commonly called CMC, for short, emerged in the 1980s as an umbrella term to encompass a range of online or internet communication formats, including e-mails, chats or instant messaging.

***“CMC is communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers”***

(Herring 1996: 01). In the field of Information Communication Technologies, or ICT’s, the notion of synchronicity – does communication happen in real time (synchronous) or do

senders send their messages to recipient at their convenience (asynchronous) - is used to distinguish between the different CMC modes. E-mails like SMS's refer to an asynchronous type of text messaging; I might send someone an e-mail or an SMS at midnight and not expect a reply until a decent hour the next morning. Whereas chats and instant messaging are synchronous; I only message someone when I know that he or she is online. At least, that how in principle the two systems of CMC one-to-one communication work. However, the difference between chats and instant messaging lies in the fact that the former denotes a one-to-many synchronous CMC; the latter to a one-to-one synchronous CMC. To narrow down the scope of this paper, a remark is worth noting: only instant messaging will be dealt with and therefore will get the lion's share in this study.

There is no doubt that the development of computer technology in general, and the advent of the internet in particular are flattening the world without regard to geography, distance and more surprisingly our online use of language. For its part, the internet as a major means of global communication is having a great impact on language use and instant messaging have given birth to novel linguistic phenomena and bizarre phonetic characteristics. In 2001, Herring proposed a label for CMC language; she referred to the study of such language Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis. In the same year Crystal coined the term 'Netspeak'. Both Herring and Crystal's terms are used to denote the linguistic features characterizing the range of internet-based language. So what are then the new textual properties of Arabic-based instant messaging?

At first sight and the most striking feature is the use of the Roman script to represent the content of the message, what linguists call transliteration. The transliteration process is mostly based on the ASCII-ized forms. The acronym ASCII,

standing for American Standard Code for Information Interchange, is a character encoding based on the English Alphabet. In the use of electronic fonts, ASCII has been the most widely used standard since the 1960s, like English, it is a kind of *lingua franca* for in CMC text messaging. Young Algerian users have recourse to a number of strategies involving different combinations of the French writing system making use of a morpheme-to-morpheme basis. The following examples illustrate such transliteration:

| Transliteration      | Translation    | Example                                                      |
|----------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| <i>Feyen rak</i>     | Where are you? | X: Feyen rak?                                                |
| <i>Bkheir labass</i> | (I'm) fine.    | Y :Rani feddar.<br>X : Wach rak                              |
| <i>Twahachtek</i>    | I miss you.    | Y :Bkheir labass<br>X : Twahachtni.<br>Y :Twahachtek bezaaf. |

Table1 Illustrative examples of transliteration in Algerian Arabic

The use of the Roman script to represent Arabic in instant messaging conversation and SMS texting can be traced back to two main reasons:

1. The first reason is mainly a technological one; it is ascribed to those who first designed keypads for CMC. The pioneers in the field of CMC were Americans. Originally, they were thinking only about how to facilitate communication in the English language and they didn't anticipate the problem that might arise when speakers of other languages try to

communicate online. The text transmission protocol on the computer and the cellular phone is based on the ASCII character set. This set makes use of the Roman alphabet and the sounds of the English language.

2. The second reason is mainly related to practicality. Most of the texters share on the ease they have in manipulating ASCII-ized keypads. Most of them note that, even with the availability of the Arabic script keypads, they prefer using the Roman script; it's a matter of greater familiarity with Roman script keyboard layout.

The second striking feature of this type language is that the letters are interspersed with numerals. An *ad hoc* solution consists in inserting Arab numerals which mirror or resemble the relevant Arabic letters in shape. These numerals appear as follows:

| Numeral | Arabic Phoneme | Phonetic description           | Example                | Translation          |
|---------|----------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| 3       | ع              | Voiced pharyngeal fricative    | <i>3aynia nebhik</i>   | My 'eye' I love you. |
| 5       | ح              | Voiceless velar fricative      | <i>Kench 5bar?</i>     | No news?             |
| 7       | ح              | Voiceless pharyngeal Fricative | <i>En7abak 7anouni</i> | I love you, darling  |
| 2       | ء              | Glottal stop                   | <i>Ma2ltlekch</i>      | I didn't tell you    |

Table 2 Illustrative examples of the use of numerals in

## Algerian Arabic

Other numerals and numerals with a diacritic, usually an apostrophe, are used where ASCII does not provide phonologically similar orthographic symbols, but these apply mostly to the Arab Gulf region. The numerals in question are as follows:

- 6 representing ط
- 6' representing ظ
- 8 representing ق
- 9 representing ص
- 9' representing ض

It is worth noting in this very specific context that the name given to the use of transliteration interspersed with numerals is “Arabic Chat Alphabet” or “Arabish”. What adds a further layer of complexity to this newly-established language type is that there are no strict rules for conversion into Arabic and the way of writing varies one country to another and from one accent to another. What is more, testing bears far more resemblance to oral language than its written counterpart, and that it is, according to the psych-structural model, a written version of oral language. Paradoxically, this system has gained common use in informal online settings between mates, friends and intimates.

In the light of what has been said about what we call *Arabic Chat Alphabet*, we come up with the conclusion that the aforementioned linguistic properties of CMC are deliberate choices made by the texters to

- 1- Economize on typing effort;
- 2- Mimic spoken language;

### 3- Express themselves creatively.

On the other hand, Blackman (2004) notes that youngsters use a combination of their knowledge of the language combined with their innate creative abilities to write an existing language in new and original ways

From a linguistic standpoint, the use of such unconventional and non-standard forms do harm to the Arabic language. The winner in this ‘battle’ is the Latin script and not least the English language as 60% of the internet users in the Arab world are in the Arab Gulf region. The use of the ASCII-ized forms in CMC is in effect an implicitly contribution to the development and spread of the English language. I’m of the opinion that the explosive use of the internet has enormously contributed to the learning of English because of the benefits it offers in manipulating this tool. That’s a tiny aspect of the linguistic integration. The linguistic integration is a level of the multi-dimensional globalization process. As the adage has it, that’s a horse of another colour, i.e. another story.

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