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Deconstructing the linguistic features of hybrid text-based online social network communication among Algerian Facebook users: A case study

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Abstract

This paper aims at dissecting the foremost innovative linguistic features that characterize the hybrid text-based online social network communication of some Algerian Facebook users. It also seeks to emphasize the role of computer-mediated communication, mainly social networking sites (SNSs), in the modernization of stigmatized informal language varieties as in the case of Algerian Dialectal Arabic (ADA). To achieve this, a qualitative research approach, in which both the researcher's long-term participant observation and a descriptive content analysis of a corpus of 30 hybrid text-based Facebook posts, is adopted for investigation. Moreover, the relevant data was collected from a virtual Facebook group community that was chiefly created by some younger Algerian EFL students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret in Algeria in order to share information related to their studies. Interestingly, the findings of our case study revealed that the ADA is linguistically accommodated to some non-standard and unconventional spellings of hybrid informal writing such as transliteration in its two forms, the use of distinctive signs such as numbers for some letters, the partial and/or full removal of vowel sounds for shortenings, the occurrence of written code switching/mixing and loanwords, and deficiency in using punctuation marks. Ultimately, the research ends with some recommendations for future research in the domain of text-based online communication with reference to the sociolinguistic situation in Algeria.

Keywords

Algerian Facebook users, Netspeak, Algerian dialectal Arabic, text-based online communication, multilingualism, hybrid linguistic features.

1. Introduction

From the dawn of the Information Age, through the late 20th century and proliferation of modern communication technology in most societies around the globe, scientists, developers and engineers have invented evermore advanced technological devices and electronic social network sites (SNSs) devoted to human communication. Unlike the customary face-to-face communication, online social network communication (OSNC) entails the utilization of electronic tools and digital internet-based software for someone to set up communion with others and to convey information to them at whatever time and place he/she wishes to. Moreover, researchers interested in scrutinizing the impact of SNSs on human communication tend to use interchangeable technical terms such as cyber communication, online communication, virtual communication, digital communication and even SNC as references to the cover

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term of computer-mediated communication (CMC). The latter is defined as “the communication produced when human beings interact with one another by transmitting messages via networked computers” (Herring, 2001, p.612). In this context, the term “messages” is predisposed to include all CMC modes that humans have communicated through so far such as SMS, emails, Facebook, video conferencing and so forth.

More importantly, to express ideas, beliefs and emotions, people have constantly communicated through language, which is primarily conceptualized as a coherent structured system of verbal and non-verbal linguistic signs that individuals use to accomplish different communicative cues. However, with the incorporation of machines and online platforms in the interactional process, Algerian bloggers, mainly Facebook users, have demonstrated their linguistic innovation in creating new fashionable written lexical forms, unconventional spellings and abbreviated words which have become norms of online text-based SNC in Algeria. In this regard, the notion of “Facebook language” is used in this paper as a reference to the informal hybrid online variety used by Algerians when interacting on Facebook and which is no longer deemed as standard language. Therefore, the present paper endeavours to apply a structural analysis of the so-called “Facebook Language” used by Algerians in their daily SNC as it seeks to identify the major innovative linguistic features associated with that online variety.

2. Online Social Network Communication

As its name indicates, OSNC refers here to those web-based networking sites that humans make use of in order to establish and reinforce social communication with one another. It is further regarded as a worldwide network that enables internet surfers and bloggers to construct various social ties and connections, and share their ideas and life experience with others. Thanks to the SNSs that computers and smartphones offer on their screens, people nowadays are no longer obliged to leave their houses, offices or even their beds to have contact with their friends, family members and co-workers. They generally assemble on these networking sites to socialize with their comrades and acquaintances, to share information with others, and to perceive and be perceived (Boyd, 2011). In a similar vein, Parks (2011) state that SNSs function as public venues for the creation of assorted online communities which allow their members to sustain and maintain prospects of sociability, significant relationships with others, conviviality, sympathy and support. In addition to this, it was unearthed that among the main causes that have made individuals join and use virtual communities is the freedom to express opinions and to search for social support (Herring, 1996). That is to say, cyberspace is likely to provide a secure virtual atmosphere, especially for those who seek to strengthen social ties with others and self-representation as well.

It is worth noting that the mutual engagement and active participation of “netizens”, to borrow Crystal’s concept (2006), in a given online community will perhaps contribute to fostering joint citizenship and social cohesion that may have been evaporating in offline communication. In this regard, Jones (1997) listed four crucial criteria that underpin the bonds in virtual communities and which are likely to tell them apart from simple online and even offline communities. Hence, virtual communities necessitate a minimum level of interactivity, a range of interlocutors, a minimum level of persistent membership, and finally a virtual common public space (Jones, 1997). However, it seems that Jones’s four criteria may have dismissed a vital element which, without it, any given online and/or offline grouping would be meaningless and passive. There must be a set of shared norms concerning language use, since netizens should have at least one language variety in common as they need to be aware of the unique linguistic features associated with hybrid online communication, as in the case of Algerian Facebook users, in order to avoid communication breakdown.

2.1. Facebook language: A new Netspeak

It is worth pointing out that Facebook has grown to be one of the most popular and heavily used social networking sites in Algeria and the whole world today, and has gone through various updates by its founders since day one. It is a vast global cyberspace on which individuals can freely create their personal profiles, as it allows them to endlessly join diverse group communities and pages and participate in different online events. Furthermore, Facebook provides many possibilities for its users to interact more effectively with their friends through many online communicative practices, namely posting, commenting, chatting, sharing, reacting and tagging. More importantly, Facebook functions as

a melting-pot for its users to spread their ideas, share news, and meet people with diverse sociocultural backgrounds and geographical locations. In short, Facebook has developed as an innovative means of communication through which individuals can actualize their desires to connect and share information using the different tools and features offered by Facebook (Triana, et al., 2020).

Interestingly, it is commonly acknowledged that the integration of web-based services in human-to-human communication has given birth to new fashionable styles of language use. The major assumption is that “texting” has developed in the 21st century “as a highly distinctive graphic style, full of abbreviations and deviant uses of language, used by a young generation that doesn’t care about standards” (Crystal, 2008, p.07). In his description of the distinct linguistic features manifested in online communication, Crystal (2001) coined the notion of “Netspeak” as a reference to the type of language used in social media interactions. For him, “Netspeak” is an electronic language that is full of informal abbreviated words and acronyms, unusual spellings, capitalizations and punctuation. More importantly, it remains an innovative means of communication and a hybrid linguistic variety in the sense that it comprises features of both colloquial face-to-face interaction and writing (Crystal, 2001).

As far as the language of online communication is concerned, the expression “linguistic features” is primarily used in this study to describe the fundamental components of a given written syntactic construction appearing on the screen. In a similar vein, Baron (2008, p.158) categorizes “emoticons, lexical shortenings, acronyms, abbreviations, contractions” as the main lexical patterning of Netspeak. In some cases, Algerian Facebook users tend to incorporate certain signs (letters and numbers) for contraction and convenience as in the French word “2r1” (de rien) which means “welcome” in English, the Arabic word “39al” (عقل, mind) and the Algerian dialectal Arabic phrase “rak 4444444” (i.e. you are “very handsome”). Moreover, emoticons such as ;-) and 8-) have also been invented as graphic representations of body language in online written discourse and they are used to strengthen the meaning of what someone feels. In this respect, Derks et al (2008) believe that “Emoticons may be used to emphasize or clarify one’s feelings but also to soften a negative tone and to regulate the interaction, just as smiles and frowns do in daily life” (p.380). They function the same way as body language does in an offline communicative context. On Facebook, emoticons do serve as a helpful device for the users of Netspeak to express different emotions and feelings in one’s message (Mustafa, et al., 2015).

As far as the context of the present research is concerned, we have purposely coined the notion of “Facebook language”, mainly the one used by the Algerian younger generation, to refer to those non-standard text-based linguistic properties that have become common among Algerian Facebook users who frequently engage in online communication through Facebook. Those linguistic properties have allegedly designed the frame of the so-called “new-writing” which is in turn going to transfigure human communication and language use (Crystal, 2001). More importantly, it is worth pointing out this informal text-based linguistic variety that is brought into play by users of Facebook in Algeria resembles to some extent their spoken local variety, namely Algerian Dialectal Arabic (ADA), although they may differ in terms of orthography, pronunciation, morphology and lexicon as will be clarified later. In actual fact, Mostari (2018) asserts that ADA has evolved in the periphery of Algerian language planning restrictions, having grown independently from the policies of language planners, but it now functions as a leading force in the creation of new structures of written communication. Being the “mother tongue” of most speakers in Algeria, ADA (known also as “El-Darija” or “El-Amiyya” among Algerians) is the language of day-to-day verbal communication and is used mostly in spontaneous informal situational contexts. But with the emergence of up-to-the-minute modes of virtual communication, ADA has developed as a unique mode of “new-writing”, and consequently,

The accommodation has been rapid and widespread and Algerian Arabic speakers have not relied on previously developed linguistic and orthographic norms, but have started creating their own linguistic norms, which include the use of colloquial forms of Arabic and language mixing, the development of a stock of linguistic forms, such abbreviations, acronyms, modified orthographies and representations of non-speech sounds, and the adoption of the Latin script in the place of Arabic script, with new conventions for representing Arabic sounds. (Mostari, 2018, p.10)

It is worth noting that Mostari’s conclusions mentioned above were inferred from her examination of SMS samples collected from Algerian teens living in the town of Sidi Bel Abbes situated in the west of Algeria. Her findings revealed the extent to which SMS communication can enhance the status of

local varieties in the linguistic landscape of the country and receive recognition by those who are in charge of language planning policy. More importantly, qualitative analysis of her SMS samples has illustrated that the linguistic behaviour of Algerian speakers is being accommodated to new technology – a process which is based on already-existing features of verbal communication which are currently being customized to writing. That is to say, SMS language is a variety which is based on ADA instead of official Modern Standard Arabic (hereafter MSA) which is used in both formal spoken and written situational contexts (Mostari, 2018). Within the same line of thought, Berrabah (2014, p.01) defines SMS language as “the mode of expression/communication that uses mostly colloquial speech or unusual adapted vocabulary words, unconventional abbreviations and distinctive signs i.e. it is no longer considered as a standard language”. We, therefore, hypothesize that the linguistic behaviour of Algerian Facebook users may also be affected by those non-standard features of new-writing as found in SMS communication.

3. The linguistic context of the study

Based on the fact that Facebook has grown a worldwide network that brings people from different cultures together, (multi) bilingualism has thus become a must for social networkers to develop intercultural understanding and achieve the prerequisites of globalization through Facebook and other SNSs. Besides their mother tongue, which is mainly used to communicate with native “netizens” and used mostly in informal situations, there is, however, a growing tendency among Algerian Facebook users to learn foreign languages to enrich their linguistic repertoires and to interact more effectively in online communication. In view of that, one can state that the French and English languages seem to enjoy greater priority in the foreign language learning process over other languages such as Spanish and German by the majority of Algerian speakers. While English is needed for pragmatic reasons, mainly to keep up with the modern waves of globalization and ongoing technological advancement, the existence of the French language in Algeria dates back to the long presence of French colonialism that lasted for nearly 130 years in the country. Unquestionably, France is the only colonial power that has had dominant impact on the sociocultural, linguistic, economic and political levels in Algeria (Berrabah and Benabed, 2021).

Since the contact between regional Arabic and French lasted for a very long period (1830-1962), a good deal of French borrowed words has slid into ADA, being adopted phonologically, and to a lesser degree semantically, in day-to-day interactions (Mouhadjer, 2002). In other words, the French language has become an indispensable ingredient of most Algerians’ speech repertoires in the sense that “the majority of speakers shift back and forth easily and purposely from Arabic to French in their daily interaction and many speak, read and write it proficiently in both formal and informal settings as if they were native speakers” (Berrabah and Benabed, 2021, p. 139). So, ADA is in fact a hybrid linguistic variety in the sense that countless loanwords have entered it and then been adapted to its phonological and grammatical system as well. The French language is overtly recognized as a first foreign language in Algeria, but it is also recognized as a second official language due to its wide use in educational institutions, industry, telecommunication, finance, medicine and civic life.

Moreover, the “Arabic language” is overtly ranked as a national as well as an official language of the country, as it symbolizes the sociocultural heritage of Algerian society and its Islamic values. However, the expression “Arabic language” is in fact quite general and most importantly ambiguous given that it can appear in three forms mainly: classical Arabic (hereafter CA), MSA and ADA. Although it is considered a dead language, CA, the language of the Holy Quran, is the very standard variety of Arabic and the language in which most poems of pre- and even post-Islamic eras were written. Yet, its use is very limited nowadays in most Arabic-speaking countries when compared to MSA. The latter is the simplified version of CA, as it was codified and standardized in order to meet the needs of modern times. Principally, the high variety, MSA, is used in formal written and spoken situations, official manuscripts, education, mass media, etc; while the low variety, ADA, is supposed to be used in informal situations and spontaneous communicative events.

Berber (often referred to as “Tamazight”) is a local language variety that is spoken by a very limited number of people in Algeria when compared to Arabic. It is an umbrella term that includes many sub-varieties such as Kabyle, Chaouia, Mozabite and so on. However, such oral forms are not largely used in a text-based online communication since their letters are still not inserted within the keyboard’s typing system. That’s why some Berber speakers often used Arabic script, and sometimes the Latin one,

to communicate with each other. In spite of this, Berber/Tamazight has gained political recognition in the Algerian language planning strategy and was announced as a national language in February 2002 by President Bouteflika and is now being taught at Algerian schools and universities.

4. Method

Seeing that online SNC in Algeria has given rise to new-fangled linguistic patterns of Netspeak, the present paper seeks then to provide an empirical examination of Facebook language. Therefore, for the sake of deconstructing the various innovative features of the latter, a qualitative research approach was adopted through which a content-based analysis of 30 written posts collected from the Algerian Facebook Group “English Language Department of Tiaret #Familly” is employed in the study. In essence, the target Facebook Group was created by some younger Algerian EFL students at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret for educational purposes; a group in which the English language is supposed to be used as the only medium of communication. However, this is completely the opposite of what actually occurs and what has been observed, since a mixture of different language varieties and unusual typing forms are used when interacting in that virtual Facebook community, as will be highlighted later on.

As for the data collection procedures, the researchers relied on their long-term participant observations as members of that Facebook group and the “note-taking” instrument in order to collect the relevant data. Moreover, the process of data collection took nearly three months as the relevant Facebook posts were screenshotted first and then copied without any modifications. As far as the research objective is concerned, only text-based “hybrid” posts were taken into account, while other items like videos, photos and even non-hybrid and well-formed posts were disregarded as well, simply because they correspond to standards of formal writing.

5. Results and discussion

This section is devoted to analysis and discussion of the main findings from a qualitative point of view. It will highlight the major linguistic features that online members of the target Facebook community tend to make use of when publishing their text-based posts. In this vein, each feature will be associated with some text-based posts for illustration and explanation. The posts are copied as they appear on the screen without any kind of modifications by the researchers.

5.1. The major linguistic features of the Algerian ‘Facebook language’

5.1.1. Transliteration

In fact, many Algerian Facebook users, mainly those who are familiar with how to use the Latin alphabet to write Arabic varieties correctly, tend to transliterate extensively when interacting via Facebook and other most common web-based texting services. As far as the context of the present study is concerned, transliteration can appear in two forms: either Romanized Arabic (writing Arabic varieties using the Latin alphabet) or Arabized Latin languages (writing foreign languages using the Arabic alphabet) as in the case of French and English. Consider the following two Facebook posts:

P1: *سلام خصني برومييار اني ودوزيام اني و طروازيام اني بقولولي شاهم بقراو ف literature*
 /salam khašni proumyar a:ni w douzya:m a:ni w[arwazyæm a:ni yğoulouli: færa:hom yeqraw
 fe literature pli:z/
 ‘Peace, I need someone to tell me what do first year and second year and third year study in literature please’

P2: *Slm bansa9sikom winta rahom m3awlin yhalou site w ysahou les fautes li darohom!! Thanks in advance*
 ‘Peace, I want to ask you when will they release the site and correct the faults they have made!!Thanks in advance’

Based on the fact that Arabic scripts outnumber those of Latin (except for vowel sounds), it seems that writing French or English words and sentences using Arabic letters does not require much in terms of innovative writing skill from Algerian online users when compared to its counterpart case. The reason

is that, in some cases, Algerian netizens are likely to spell foreign words as they pronounce them in their local variety. That is to say, they tend to adopt and then adapt them morpho-phonologically to the system of ADA, and then become loanwords like the French words 'برومييار' (première, i.e. first) and 'طروازيام' (troisième, i.e. third) instead of spelling them as 'بغوميياغ' and 'تغوازيام' respectively in P1 for instance. To mark long vowel sounds, a cluster of the same Arabic vowel sound is usually employed for emphasis as in the case of the English word 'بليبييز'.

In spite of the existing option of switching from Arabic to Latin or vice versa on the keyboard, the majority (95%) of the collected sample of Facebook posts were written in Romanized Arabic, as this may have something to do with our EFL students' familiarity with the Latin alphabet and the way they can put them in a linear order to express the right Arabic meaning. Unlike the first case, writing Arabic (mainly ADA) using a Latin script has encouraged Algerian online users to develop new conventional symbols and signs for the letters and sounds that do not exist in the Latin scripts (mainly English and French). Hence, numbers are generally used to represent given sounds in Arabic as in the Arabic words 'bansa9sikom' and 'm3awlin' in P2. In this context, number 3 represents the Arabic consonant sound (ع) while number 9 stands for the Arabic consonant sound (ق) and both of them do not exist in the French or English alphabets. Other symbolic numbers are also highlighted in the example below:

P3: *Li hamale relewi ta3h ta3 3am lifatt k ydiir Asq y3e6toh w7do5ra wla sYy*

'The one who has lost his grades sheet of last year how should he act...Are they going to give him another one or not'

In P3, the numbers 6, 7, and 5 are used to represent the Arabic consonant sounds (ط), (ح), and (خ) respectively. For the latter, Algerian Facebook users often use the symbolic Latin script "kh" instead of the number 5, as the former tend to be more convenient and widespread than the latter. In a similar vein, the Arabic sound (غ) is frequently spelled as "gh" in the Romanized ADA. Consider the following example:

P4: *Slm bghit nsa9sikom khouti rani mblocker master 1 w baghi ndeblocker w kifah ndir m3a l'administration*

'Peace.I want to ask you my brothers. I have blocked my master 1 studies and I want to resume it...how shall I act administratively?'

As for the other remaining numbers (1, 2, 4, 8), they generally occur as shortening linguistic signs in certain foreign words like 2day (**today**), 2main (**demain**), b4u (**before** you), b1sur (**bien** sur), bn8 (**bon nuit**) depending on the phonetic environment in which they occur. Hence, the use of web-based services such as the ones provided by the Facebook platform has been accompanied by the development of new conventions of orthography. Transliteration and the use of numbers as symbols for some Arabic and/or Latin sounds are the major linguistic features of hybrid online communication among Algerian EFL students as Facebook users.

5.1.2. Omission of vowel sounds in words

Apart from the use of numbers and certain signs when transliterating (specifically Romanized Arabic), Algerian Facebook users commonly use reduced forms for either Arabic or Latin words in order to shorten their Facebook posts. In some cases, vowel sounds are fully, and sometimes partially, dropped from words. For instance:

P5: *SlmNsha9 les poli cops ta3 ltrtr 3rd year plzz*

'Peace. I need the handouts of literature of third year please'

P6: *le chef département ta3 français esqdmnnl9ah w nl9a l'administration 7ala c urgent!*

'Am I going to find the head of the French department and find the administration working tomorrow...it is urgent!'

In order to gain space and time, and perhaps the urgent need for someone to deliver his/her message at a rapid pace, Algerian Facebook users who transliterate a lot in their Facebook posts, comments and private conversations with their friends tend to extensively violate the standards of formal writing and

adopt hybrid linguistic styles for online communication. The omission of vowel sounds for contraction and abbreviation is quite apparent among them and has become a norm in the sphere of text-based OSNC in Algeria. In P5 above, the vowel sounds in the words “slm” (salam, i.e. peace), “litrtr” (literature), “plzz” (please) are fully dropped and only consonants are left. The word “plzz” is written as it is spoken since the author spelled the final letters “zz” not “se”. In P5, only one vowel sound is dropped in the Arabic word “Nsha9” (instead of *Nasha9* ‘I need’).

As for P6, the French word “esq” is used as an acronym for the longer expression “Est ce que”, vowel sounds are fully dropped in the French word “dmn” (domain, i.e. tomorrow) while in the Arabic words “nl9ah” (to find him) and “nl9a” (to find), vowel sounds are partially dropped from them (*nal9ah* and *nal9a*). As for the letter “c” in the French expression “c urgent!!” in P6, those who are familiar with Romanized ADA use it to a large extent when communicating via Facebook as a reduced form. From a phonological viewpoint, the letter “c” functions as a meaningful phoneme in that context and which essentially stands for the French word “c’est” (it is).

It seems, however, that Arabic abbreviations and acronyms written in Latin characters are not quite popular and are still under the process of construction. The partial deletion of vowel sounds from certain Algerian Arabic words in an online text-based communicative event on Facebook may pave the way for the development of more sophisticated and innovative shortenings, neologisms and reduced forms for several ADA expressions through time.

5.1.3. Code switching/code mixing and borrowing

As far as the language-contact phenomenon is concerned, code switching (hereafter CS) and code mixing (hereafter CM) refer to those communicative situations in which individuals shift back and forth from one language variety to another. While CS occurs, for the most part, inter-sententially, CM takes place when interlocutors switch back and forth within the sentence or clause, that is, intra-sententially. As far as the process of borrowing is concerned, this latter entails the integration and adoption of lone foreign words from the source language, and then, most of the time, adapting them to the morpho-phonological system of the host language as if they were parts of its lexicon.

It is worth noting that the sociolinguistic landscape in Algeria is widely known for being diverse at the level of language use, an intricate situation in which both genetically related and unrelated language varieties are jumbled together in day-to-day spoken discourse. Algerian speakers have acquired a linguistic competence that enables them to switch back and forth effortlessly from one language variety to another in different situational contexts, and this competence varies from one individual to another depending on his educational level. Just like spontaneous oral discourse, informal text-based online communication on Facebook in Algeria seems to be also infected by some language contact phenomena such as code switching/code mixing and borrowing as best illustrated in the following three Facebook posts:

P7: *Inscription master hors tiaret wintat w esqonline wela lazmi nro7o..Please answer*
(Fr/ADA/Eng CS)

‘When will master inscription start for those who live outside Tiaret and are they going to be held online or in presence. Please answer’

P8: *Hello guys i hope you are doing wellsvp rani taya7t la cart d’etudiant ta3i fi la sale 1 li shafha ycontactini.* (Eng/Fr/ADA CS)

‘Hello guys I hope you are doing well. Please I have lost my student’s card in room one. The one who found it contacts me’

P9: *يا سكان المملكة هل سيكون الغد موعد اعادة التسجيلات؟ ولا نكملوها تكتينات و احاسيس كوووم دابيتيدي!*
(MSA/ADA/Fr CS)

/ya so’kan lmamlaka hal sayakouno al ghad maw3id i3ædat tas3i:læt wla nkamlouha taka’hona:t wa ahasi:s koum dabi:ti:d/

‘Kingdom inhabitants.Will be tomorrow the day of re-registrations? Or shall we keep guessing and feeling as usual!’

The quantitative analysis revealed half of the corpus (50%) is multilingual in which French, ADA, and English are all mixed up together in one post. In second place comes the Fr/ADA type of CS which represents 46.66% out of the whole collected sample, while the MAS/ADA/Fr type of CS represents only 3.33%. Other types like Fr/Eng CS and ADA/Eng were not found in our corpus and may be apparent if the sample is enlarged in size. As for Berber and its varieties, no instance was found.

While the sociolinguistic research in oral CS/CM started decades ago, the shift to the study of its written counterpart has started just recently in multilingual communities, especially after the integration of SNSs and text messaging in day-to-day social communication. Facebook has, therefore, received much interest by researchers dealing with CS/CM as it provides them with a large amount of relevant visual linguistic data for analysis, description and making new inferences about the way language works in text-based online SNC. As far as the context of the present research is concerned, the large majority of the Facebook posts collected from our EFL students' group community all contained at least an instance of language mixing as pointed to in P7, P8, and P9 above and even in all the aforementioned posts.

This result confirms Berrabah's hypothesis (2014) that those individuals who are normally able to code switch/mix when they speak will do it when they write. Psychologically speaking, bilingual individuals like our Algerian EFL students, who are involved in online communication, tend to write what they speak – even without being aware that they have code-switched back and forth in their online written discourse from one variety to another. This implies that CS/CM is a naturally occurring linguistic phenomenon practised in both the spoken and written discourse of most Algerian speakers, as it is in some cases motivated by some socio-pragmatic factors such as prestige and signalling group identity, and even linguistic ones like the need-filling motive (lexical gaps).

5.1.4. Deficiency in punctuation

As far as the standards of orthography of formal writing are concerned, it seems that the informal Algerian Facebook language as used by EFL university students has started to go beyond the conventional norms of writing. Punctuation marks and capitalization are often overlooked by online users, while in some cases they are just misused. Consider the following two Facebook posts:

P10: *Salut hope doing well je vais poser une qst est ce que les diplômés (anglais) l9aw job ou pas Soit la licence wla master*

'Hi. I hope you are doing well. I want to pose a question. Did those who got their diplomas in either Bachelor degree or Master of Arts in English find a job or not'

P11 *Salut. Svp Tayaht Sbah La Carte nationale f Département ta3 anglais kach ma Wahed l9aha.*

'Hi. Please. I have lost my identity card at the department of English in case someone has found it'.

As far as P10 is concerned, punctuation is totally disregarded and only the word "Soit" (i.e. either) is capitalized, as it is neither a proper noun nor the first word in a sentence. In P11, only two full stops are used; one after the salutation word "Salut" (i.e. Hi) and the other one appears at the end of the post. However, what should capture our attention in P11 is surely the misuse of capital letters in the words "Tayaht" (V), "Sbah" (com N), "L" (Art), "Carte" (com N), "Département" (com N), and "Wahed" (indefinite Pr), and this implies that online users tend to violate to some extent the standards of "grammatically correct" writing when interacting on Facebook. Caring about the content and aim of the message (i.e. the Facebook post) instead of paying great attention to its form (i.e. grammar, word choice and orthography) is likely to indicate that some Facebook users are psychologically motivated by the need to express their needs, thoughts and moods the same way as they do when they interact verbally. In spite of the fact that a computer and/or smartphone keyboard contains all the punctuation marks needed for writing, some online users, however, seem to be more conscious that the readers of their Facebook posts can easily understand the messages that they want to convey without using punctuation.

For the most part, the improper usage of capitalized words in some Facebook posts as in P11 may be related to some technical errors made on a smartphone keyboard, e.g. autocorrect. That is to say,

the latter has been updated to display the main options of the word being typed, and once the individual shifts to the next word, the capitalized alternative of that word is often selected automatically by the keyboard. That is why some online users tend to avoid correcting what has been wrongly typed in their posts before publishing them on the Facebook walls. For them, this would consume too much time and effort, and make the process of typing slower in pace, and thus, will cause boredom. Consequently, the (re) occurrence of ill-formed linguistic units in online text-based communication denotes hybridization in the sense that they correspond to the features of informal spoken discourse more than to those of the formal written one, but it in fact is neither.

6. Conclusion

This work is purely analytical and descriptive since it has been mainly devoted to the exposure of the major formative and innovative linguistic characteristics of online text-based OSNC among Algerian Facebook users. It raises a momentous technology-related issue in language innovation, herein the adoption of fashionable unconventional modes of written spontaneous online communication in Algeria. As active netizens who frequently log onto Facebook for different motives, a sample of our EFL learners at Ibn Khaldoun University of Tiaret (Algeria) tend to publish their text-based posts on their Facebook group in a purely “hybrid style” which resembles that of their local spoken variety, namely ADA, to a large extent. Accordingly, this gives the impression that the latter may have finally found its way to seize a respectful sociolinguistic position besides other formal and more prestigious written language varieties that exist in Algeria, namely CA, MSA, French and English, thanks to CMC and the technology of SNSs like Facebook.

From a purely linguistic viewpoint, it seems that there is a growing unplanned tendency among younger educated Algerian Facebook users, as in the case of Algerian EFL university learners, to award their colloquial mother tongue the status of a “Netspeak” which has been developed its own unique linguistic features in its written version. This is totally normal, simply for the reason that it is neither codified nor standardized by Algerian language planners and decision-makers as opposed to its formal counterpart, the MSA variety. Hence, it seems that the obsession with the virtual word and the assorted opportunities it offers for its users has thus had a considerable impact on language use and choice in online communication, as younger Algerian online users tend to accommodate their day-to-day spoken language variety to meet the requirements of online text-based interactions on Facebook.

The present investigation might be a starting point for further research in the terrain of computer-mediated discourse within the Algerian context, mainly with reference to its intricate and diglossic situation on the one hand, and by taking people’s attitudes towards such online linguistic practices on Facebook on the other hand. For the validity and reliability of our research findings, we recommend more empirical wide-ranging case studies using mixed method approaches of various virtual communities (including pages and groups) on Facebook that differ in their aims and scope. In addition to this, future investigations should also cover the other two forms of text-based interaction on Facebook, namely “comments” and “messenger chats” and extend it to other SNSs such as WhatsApp, Instagram, etc.

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Appendix

Key to Phonetic transcription

Arabic sound	Symbols/letters	Arabic sound	Symbols/letters
ض	/ḏ/, /dh/	ه ه	/h/
ص	/ṣ/	خ	/kh/, '5'
ث	/th/	ح	/h/, '7'
ق	/q/, '9'	ج	/ʒ/
ف	/f/	د	/d/
غ	/gh/	ش	/ʃ/, 'sh', 'ch'
ع	'3'	س	/s/
ي	/y/	ت	/t/
ب	/b/, /p/	ن	/n/
ل	/l/	م	/m/
ا	/a/	ك	/k/
ر	/r/	و	/w/, 'ou'
،	Used before letters to indicate stress	ط	/t/, 't' '6'
ق	/ġ/	ز	/z/