Language Choice in Short Message Service (SMS) among Young Algerians: mobile technology redefines norms of written interaction

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Résumé

La présente étude sur de jeunes Algériens utilisant le service de messages courts et vivant à Oran vise à étudier le choix de la langue et de l'innovation linguistique dans la communication par SMS. Une question centrale a cette préoccupation se concentrera sur le choix des langues faites par cette population, et comment ce choix est manifesté de façon créative. Pour y parvenir, nous avons fait des recherches sur les questions suivantes : quelles sont les langues utilisées par ces jeunes lors des ces interactions? Y at-il de nouvelles formes de langage (s)? Les principaux résultats obtenus dans cette étude ont révélé que l'utilisation des langues dans la communication par SMS chez les jeunes Algériens se fait de façon créative et bien adaptée pour atteindre les besoins de la communication. Les SMSs se retrouvèrent également à contenir l'orthographe non conventionnelle fondée sur la langue française et une version «romanisée» de l'arabe algérien (plus précisément l'arabe algérien parlé a Oran). L'utilisation de cette nouvelle version écrite de l'arabe algérien est principalement destinée à faciliter l'imitation du parlé que ces jeunes utilisateurs avaient l'habitude d'utiliser dans leurs conversations de tous les jours. Nous supposons donc, en fin de cette étude, que l'écriture créative de l'arabe algérien semble servir 'le parlé' se trouvant dans la communication par SMS et pourrait contribuer aux changements dans l'équilibre linguistique en Algérie et même dans le monde arabe.

Introduction

As a major means of global communication, just like the Internet, SMS communication is having a great impact on language use. It is a boom not only to the English language usage (Baron, 1998, 2001; Herring, 1996, 2001) but potentially to many languages. A growing number of studies are investigating the

linguistic features of SMS communication in non English-speaking communities[1].

It is the intention of this work to examine language choice and linguistic innovation in SMS communication among young Algerian texters. A central question in this concern will focus on the choice of languages made by this population, and how this choice is creatively manifested.

Methodology
Textual Data collection (Language Diaries)

Following a protocol commonly used elsewhere in the world (e.g. Herring 2001, Crystal, 2001; Anis, 2007) when analyzing textual features of SMS messages, I distributed paper diaries[2] to one hundred male and female students. The participants were asked to record only two text messages they sent over the past twenty-four-hour period. I ended up with a total of two hundred distinct messages.

The Sample

The following tables summarize demographic data as well as linguistic backgrounds of the participants collected from the language diaries.

Age	18	19	20	21	22
Out of 100 informants	19	14	29	21	17

Table 1: Demographic Matters
(*Source*: Language Diaries)
Languages in Algeria

	Classical Arabic (CA)		French (Fr)		Berber (Br)		Algerian Spoken Arabic (ORSA)
	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken	
Out of 100 informants	86	86	86	77	00	14	100

Table 2: Linguistic Matters (Degree of Competence in Languages
(*Source:* Language Diaries)

Data Processing

The data is in fact analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis.

Languages in SMS Communication

The quantitative analysis of results obtained from the language diaries has revealed various percentages as to the use of different languages in SMS communication

Figure 1: The Use of Languages in the Corpus
(*Source*: Language Diaries)

In the data from Figure 1 there was interesting evidence on the spoken-like nature of SMS language. SMSs tended to be more frequently used in Algerian Arabic (all the SMSs contained the variety of ORSA). The prevalence of Algerian Arabic use in SMS communication bears out Crystal's point which stipulates that it '…display(s) several of the core properties of speech' (2001:29). One of the most distinctive features of text messaging from the corpus appears to be the forms of spelling that are constantly used in colloquial language i.e. in the variety of Algerian Arabic used in Oran (ORSA). The graphs indicate that as far as the Algerian variety (ORSA) is concerned, it is found to be attributed the highest percentage (193 SMSs : 96.5 %) of use in the SMSs. This is explained by the fact that Algerian Arabic is the variety of daily conversation and social interaction. They use it in SMS to strengthen the idea of informality and probably to approximate spoken language easiness to communicate information. As far as French is concerned, it is attributed, according to the results, a secondly-ranked position (189: 94.5 %) after Algerian Arabic. This can be explained by the fact that the respondents are educated persons who are 'pushed' to use French at the most diverse moments: with the teacher, in the lecture, with friends, when chatting on the Internet, and why not in SMS.

As far as classical Arabic is concerned, results show that 12.5% of the messages (25 SMSs) contained classical Arabic sentences represented solely with the famous form of greeting *Asalm Alaikum*[3] ('Peace be upon you'), and yet which was not written using the original Arabic writing system. Despite their full mastery of written and spoken Classical Arabic (86% of participants with full mastery of written CA, and 86% with Full mastery of spoken CA) most Algerian texters are proving their unwillingness to use CA in their SMSs, may be because of the formality nature of the language which does not help much sustaining personal relationships English usage (although restricted to 6 SMSs : 3%) is partly explained by the fact that some of the students were coming from a literary branch[4] in which the English module is given impetus. These students showed me mastery of the English language and their desire to use it especially when they knew that I am a teacher of English. The second reason for the use of English in Algerian texting may be ascribed to the place English is gaining among young Algerian texters who became more and more interested in the lingua franca they use when communicating online. It can be also seen as 'a language which ensures an image of modernity and academic achievements' (Source*:* Informant N°: 36). For the large majority who did not succeed to provide English messages, one of my informants argued "may be because we still lack proficiency in using the language and even if we know the language there is fear that partners will not understand our SMSs, unlike Algerian Arabic and French which are the 'lingua franca' of SMS communication in Algeria" (*Source* :Informant N°: 68)

Not surprisingly, Berber scores only 5% (10 SMSs). This is probably due to the fact that Berber speakers are minority speakers who use Berber as their in-group variety, but in case of communication with non-Berber texters they may resort to other language varieties mainly Algerian Arabic or French[5].

Representation of languages in SMS Communication

Theoretically speaking, language use in SMS should be close to written literature[6] and far more different from that of everyday communication[7] as we are dealing with "purely" written media. However, findings are opposing conventions. Crystal notes (2001:29), despite being "expressed through the medium of writing, [SMS, emails☐ display several of the core properties of speech.". Anecdotal evidence prior to this study had indicated that young Algerian students often write Algerian Arabic (ORSA)- an informal non-codified language variety-'in French' whilst texting-i.e. they write Algerian Arabic employing Roman characters[8], and attempt to replicate the sounds phonetically 'in French'.

Romanized Algerian Arabic

Although there is no standard writing of Algerian Arabic, in order to represent it in SMS communication, young Algerian users have created a number of strategies involving different combinations of French writing system and numbers to either create Algerian Arabic spellings or directly translate the intended Algerian Arabic expressions into a morpheme-to-morpheme manner[9]. The identified strategies are summarized in what follows.

- **Numbers:** In the corpus 67 % of messages were found to be produced using numbers together with Roman alphabet to replicate Algerian Arabic sounds especially the voiced pharyngeal fricative which was represented by the number 3. This was done for the sake of brevity and convenience.

Number Used	Arabic Sound	Phonetic Description	Example	Translation
7 *77*	ح	Voiceless pharyngeal-fricative	*Tro7i m3aya Sa77a*	'Will you go with me''OK'

3	ع ْق	Voiced pharyngeal fricative	3chia Na3rafah 3omri	'Afternoon' ' I know him'' My lover'
5	خ	Voiceless velar fricative	5ribtiha 5bar chbab	'You destroyed it''Good news'
2	ء	Glottal stop	Masa2 el kheir	'Good evening'
8	د	Non-emphatic voiced dental (or denti-lveolar)stop	8irha w foutni	' Do it and let me peacefully'

Table 3: Numbers representing Algerian Arabic sounds
(S*ource*: Language Diaries)

• **Romanized Algerian Arabic Sounds:** In the corpus, 100% of messages were found to be produced using Roman alphabet; no other writing system was recognized.

Particle in SMS	Translation	Example
Win rak	Where are you ?	Win rak rani fedar matebtache
Rani karha wahdi	I feel fed up alone	Rani karha wahdi, matjich
Jibi lahlib	Bring milk with you	Jibi lahlib wel khobz matencish
Fouwetti tbib	Did you consult the doctor	Fouwetti tbib wela mazel
Bsahtak alsahra	Congratulations for the party	Bsahtak alsahra hata sbah
Rana rayhine	We are going to	Rana rayhine lecirque tji
Flixily	Send me credit	Flixily darwak
Tkhalass kahwa	Could you offer me a cup of coffee	Tkhalass kahwa yal massmar.
Twahechtek	I miss you	Twahechtek bezaf

| *Bkheir labass* | (I am) fine, without problems | Washrakoum Bkheir labass |

Table 4: Romanized Algerian Arabic sentences
(Source: Language Diaries)

In fact, the use of Roman characters to represent Algerian Arabic has attracted my attention to the different representations of Arabic sounds within the corpus. I observed that although 'Arabic'[10] does have a very developed set of characters for writing, none of the texters in the material (0% messages) has represented Algerian Arabic sounds using the original Arabic system of writing. A question had to be raised at this stage: What this state of affair is due to?

The problem of handling the Roman script to encode the Arabic language in SMS communication among young Algerians is appearing to embrace a number of reasons falling under two axes : The first one describes reasons related to the technology itself and the second one is more concerned with the decisions made by those who adopted that technology. In point of fact, the first factor was ascribed to those who invented keypads for CMC. Early planners of CMC tools were generally Americans, and were implicitly thinking only about how to facilitate communication in English, they did not anticipate the problems that might arise when speakers of other languages tries to communicate online. The text-transmission protocol on these tools-the computer and the mobile phone- is based on the ASCII character set[11]. This character set is based on the Roman alphabet and the sounds of the English language.

    ◾ **Figure 2 :** The ASCII character set
    ◾ (*Source*: **http://www.cs.tut.fi/~jkorpela/chars.html**)

The second factor was part and partial, due to the non-availability of Arabic characters mobile phone keypads even after their creation. This was due to the fact that Algeria, contrary to other Arab countries like Gulf countries, has not encouraged the spread

of keypads with Arabic scripts that enable SMS writers of, let say classical Arabic or Algerian Arabic, to do word processing. It is, however, estimated that (81 %) of Algerian mobile phone users possess cellular in which the Roman alphabet is the only script used for writing language (Djezzy operator, Statistics department, 2007). It is only in the last seven years (the beginnings of 2001) that Arabic scripts keypads have become increasingly widespread in Algeria due to some media needs and the installation of a vague of middle-east immigrants coming mainly from Syria and Egypt for job seeking purposes.

Another motive for texters's use of Roman characters would be the believe most of these texters share on the facility they have in manipulating ASCII-lized keypads. Most of them argue that, even with the availability of Arabic scripts keypads, they will resort to Roman characters keypads because they became acquainted with them. Being acquainted means here their capacity to type French much rapidly than Arabic. A question to be raised here: How do young Algerian texters communicating in 'Arabic'- a language with different sounds and a different writing system to the Roman scripted languages- adapt to the ASCII environment?

Throughout material, I observed that Algerian texters succeeded to adapt the medium to suit their communicative needs. To this end, they tried to represent Algerian Arabic consonant and vowel sounds using the Roman characters that best replicate the former sounds. Examples of this use include the following:

Percent age of users	Symbol Used	Arabc Sound	Phonetic Description	Example	Translation
100%	*a*	ء	Voiceless glottal stop	*Salam* **a***likum* **a***ntoum*	'Peace be upon you''You'
100%	*b*	ب	Voiced bilabial stop	**B***sahtek* **b***ach dertiha*	'Congratulations''With what did you make it?'

100%	*t*	ت	Non-emphatic voiceless dental (or denti-alveolar) stop	***T**wahechti ni* ***T**aba3tah*	' Did you miss me?'' I followed him'
41%	*j*	ج	Voiced alveolar (or palato-alveolar) affricate	*Ha**j**a man**g**ich*	'Something''I will not come'
	g				
100%	*h*	ح	Voiceless pharyngeal fricative	*Wa**h**dou N**h**awass s**h**akitte*	'Alone''I am looking for' ' Need'
100%	*kh*	خ	Voiceless velar fricative	*Wahdou**kh**ra cha**kh**assa k*	'Another one''What do you need?'
100%	*d*	د	Non-emphatic voiced dental (or denti-alveolar) stop	***D**i**d**ou* ***D**iri Iquraa*	(Nickname)'Switch on iqraa channel'
100%	*r*	ر	Voiced alveolar rolled	***R**ani fi ligmo b**r**ouhek*	'I am in the IGMO University' 'Because you, yourself,…'
100%	*z*	ز	Emphatic voiced dental fricative	*Imtia**z** **z**ahrah*	'Excellence''His chance'
24%	*ss*	س	Non-emphatic voiceless dental fricative	*Nhawa**ss** Man**s**itch man**c**itekc h*	'I am looking for''I did not forget''I did not forget you'
31%	*s*				
45%	*c*				

57% *43%*	***ch*** ***sh***	ش	Voiceless alveolar (or palato-alveolar) fricative	***Ch***riki***Sho***ufi, thablini***ch***	Mypartner''Listen, do not turn me crazy'
100%	***s***	ص	Emphatic voiceless alveolar fricative	***s***ayit***s***oumi 3achoura	'Enough''Do you fast on achoura?
72% *28%*	***d*** ***dh***	ض	Emphatic voiced (or denti-alveolar) stop	***dh***almaky ***d***robha daymen	' He was unfair with you''He beat her every time'
100%	***t***	ط	Emphatic voiceless alveolar (or denti-alveolar) stop	mateb***t***ach e***t***oulbihali	'Do not be late''Ask her a favour for me'
100%	***gh***	غ	Voiced velar fricative	***gh***ir neb***gh***ik	'Only''I love you'
100%	***f***	ف	Voicelessdental fricative	***F***ach jebtihat***f***ah mek	'With what did you bring it'' Will explain to you…'
100%	***k***	ق	Voiceless uvular stop	***K***ara3tlek netla***k***o	' I waited for you''We will meet…'
100%	***g***		Voiced velar stop	***G***ae3***g***albi	' All''my heat'
100%	***k***	ك	Voiceless velar stop	Rani ha***k***amha belmessa***k*** ***K***i ra***k***i	'Everything is all right with me''How are you ?'
100%	***l***	ل	Voiced dental lateral	***l***ay***l***a sa3ida***A***sa***l***am alikum	'Good night''peace be upon you'

100%	**m**	م	Voiced bilabial nasal	*drahamm akench*	'Money''Nothing'
100%	**n**	ن	Voiced alveolar nasal	*Nrouhou ensemble mansitekch*	' We will go together''I did not forget the past'
100%	**h**	ه	Voiceless glottal fricative	*karhahaw oudili*	' I feel fed up''Bring me'
100%	**w**	و	Voiced bilabial glide	*weldarwak*	'And the…''Now'
100%	**y**	ي	Voiced palatal glide	*'Lyoum sbah'' tebghini'*	"Today morning""Do you love me?"

Table 5 : Algerian Arabic Consonant Sounds Representation
(S*ource*: Language Diaries)

Vowel Sound	Symbol Used	Example	Translation
/a/	**<a>**	*Hadi chaba*	'This is something interesting'
/a:/	**<a>**	Kir**a**ki	'How are you ?'
/i/	*<i>*	k**i**dert**i**ha	' How did you make it?'
/ei/	*<ei>* *<i>*	*nseitElkhir rah*	'I forgot''goodness went away'
/i:/	**<i>**	*Khass imanek ykoun kbir*	'You need have a strong faith in God'
/u/	**<ou>**	*Goulilha tji*	'Ask her to come'

| /u:/ | **<oo>** | *Kount nsho**o**f fik m3andek matatbi* | 'I saw you, you do have no argument ' |
| /o/ | **<o> <u>**
<ou> | *Assalam alaik**o**(**u**)m* | ' Peace be upon you' |

Table 6 : Algerian Arabic Vowel Sounds Representation
(S*ource*: Language Diaries)

French
The other interesting result of the study was the considerable amount of French (94.5%) used by participants which was codified through Roman scripts. However, French use was not restricted to sentences where French was the only prevalent language. Rather, 171 of the total number of messages (184) contained a mixture of Algerian Arabic and French particles, what remains (13) was written in French only but with single Algerian Arabic items, as it illustrated in the following example

| *Appelle-moi stp! hanouna* | Call me, please!hanouna | Appelle-moi stp! Hanouna |

More examples on French language use in the corpus is exemplified through the following:

Particle in SMS	Translation	Example
Bonne nuit	'Good night'	<u>Bonne nuit</u> chriki smahli je vien de rentré bassah mansitakche
Bonne chance pour ton bac	'Good luck for you BAC examination'	<u>Bonne chance pour ton</u> bac nchallah dayman ver le succé
Appelle-moi stp! hanouna	Call me, please!	<u>Appelle-moi stp!Hanouna</u>

je pense à toi	'I think of you'	Nebghik é <u>je pense à toi</u>
Que dieu soit avec toi	'I wish god will help you'	<u>Que dieu soit avec toi</u> oukhti,3adam alaho ajrakoum
Avec tous mon respect	'With all my respect'	<u>Avec tous mon respect</u> ngoulek beli khatik lae3b
voila mon nouveau numéro	'Here is my new phone number'	Salam alikoum, <u>voila mon nouveau numéro</u>
Bonsoir ma chérie	'Good evening, darling'	<u>Bonsoir ma chérie</u>, raki dayratha kbira,3lache majitich.kinchoufak noukoutlek.porte toi bien et donne de té nouvelle
Je suis occupé	'I am busy'	<u>Je suis occupé</u> mnt, jet e rappelled dés que je termineré
Je veux venir	'I want to come'	Bonjour,faiza <u>je veux venire</u> chez toi le soir, bip moi si c oui.

Table 7: Examples of French Language Use (*Source*: Language Diaries)

Berber

Berber scored 5% and was found in only 10 messages. The following examples will illustrate this usage:

Particle in SMS	Translation	Example
Azoul, twahachtek, atas atas à oultmat	'good morning, I missed you so much my sister'	<u>Azoul, twahachtek, atas atas à oultmat</u>
chethagkem	'I missed you'	<u>Chethagkem</u> tu le sais bébé
Vavayiss ymouth	'his/her father is dead'	Je sais que <u>vavayiss ymouth</u>
ithuridh	'What did you write ?'	Qu'est ce K <u>ithuridh</u>
Djigh	' I have left'	<u>Djigh</u> trois questions

Table 8: Examples of the Berber Language Use (*Source*: Language Diaries)

English

There were also, in the corpus, messages written in the English language. These SMSs were entirely produced in English without some kind of interference of Algerian Arabic as it was the case with French and Berber SMSs. It was also observed that these SMSs are not ready-made ones, they are, on the contrary, the creation of the texters themselves. Here are the only 6 SMSs written in English..

E.g.1 : *For the whole of the world you are somebody but for me you are the whole of the World…*

E.g.2: if 100% of people love you be sure that I'm one of them…if 99% hate you be sure

that I'm the 1% which love you…if 100% hate you be sure that I'm dead…!!!...

E.g.3 : *Good morning, darling I miss you…!!!...*

E.g.4 : *Gd day: and also Gd lunch, do not forget, CU…!...*

E.g.5 : *to be happy you need to be healthy and wealthy…*

E.g.6 : *Do you love me ? I need you for my life…*

Informal language

Interestingly, results from the textual data collected through the language diaries show that language use in mobile text messaging among young Algerian users shares many characteristics with spontaneous, informal spoken language (ORSA). In their text-messages, young Algerians "write their SMSs as if they are saying them". Features that are characteristic of spoken language such as dialectal words (e.g., Manich (I cannot), chui (I am), chai pa (I do not know), bessah (But),a + (see you Later), pasque (because))

are spelled out in SMS. Moreover, it is easy to neutralize in this form of language the spoken-language accent structure of Algerian Arabic dialects mainly through vocabulary (e.g., the word spelled '**Kiraki'** is typically the spoken form of "How are you ?" in ORSA which will be spelled out '**Washraki'** in Algerian Arabic spoken , for example, in Algiers.

Conclusion

This work is based on the assumption that when a contemporary language technology is in contact with language users, there are observable contact phenomena which are typical to both technology and its users. In respect to SMS communication, one cannot deny but recognize the novelty of a whole new set of linguistic practices characterizing this new technology.

This work has presented a number of new linguistic practices in SMS texts among young Algerians. The research showed results related to the use of a new written version of Algerian Arabic namely Romanized Algerian Arabic. This form of language is mainly used to facilitate imitating the colloquialism that texters are acquainted with in daily conversations.

I suggest, ultimately, that the creative writing of Algerian Arabic appears to serve foster the spoken-like nature of SMS communication and may contribute to changes in the linguistic balance of the Arab world.

At the end of this research, one may say that there is no doubt that SMS communication is a technological change which has brought about social change and by consequence language change. SMS text messaging- is something that is gaining more and more significance in the lives of many young Algerians today, and something that people seem to have a lot of opinions and concerns about it.

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