

The Linguistic Characteristics and Semiotic Functions of Algerian Students' Facebook Posts



Dr. Silhadi Lynda*

Lecturer in the Department of English, Algiers 2 University.

lynda.silhadi@univ-alger2.dz

date de soumission: 12/02/2022 date d'acceptation: 16/04/2022 Date de publication: 04/05/2022



Abstract

This paper investigates the Algerian youth's languaging via the digital social platform Facebook to identify linguistic features and semiotic functions of the digital communication of this particular social group. Facebook, due to its size and popularity, is largely argued by sociolinguists to be a rich context for language investigation and which linguists today cannot deny to be very impactful on language variation. The youths are the main vehicle of language change and main users of technology; thus, youths' interaction via social digital network can yield rich data about new linguistic and semiotic features which in turn can inform about a new linguistic identity of the young generation and its ideological implication in society. The corpus to this investigation are 180 Facebook posts and comments in addition to data generated from focus group interviews with university students as regards some linguistic characteristics related to their Facebook language. The use of both on-line and off-line data offers the possibility to interpret virtual data from a concrete reality. The Facebook languaging of the youths is analysed from both variationist and interactionist sociolinguistic and also semiotic perspectives. This study reveals that the youths are inventive, creative, and positive; they also vary codes according to different social settings and rely heavily on connotative meanings and satires to express thoughts.

* Corresponding Author

Key words: Facebook, computer-mediated communication, sociolinguistics, variation, code-switching, emoticons, speech acts, semiotics, connotation

Résumé

Facebook est la plateforme digitale d'interaction sociale la plus utilisée au monde surtout par la jeune population. L'intersection entre les jeunes et la technologie a créé de nouvelles formes de communication différentes de celles de la communication traditionnelle. La sociolinguistique se tourne d'avantage vers cette communication virtuelle, qui est une source très riche en langage, pour étudier la variation linguistique. Cet article présente et discute les résultats d'une étude quantitative et qualitative qui analyse des publications d'étudiants sur Facebook d'une perspective sociolinguistique et sémiotique. La question principale posée dans cette recherche est de savoir si Facebook est une menace pour la langue et la société. A cet effet, 180 publications d'étudiants universitaires algériens ont été analysées et une interview de groupe a été employée pour découvrir les caractéristiques linguistiques de la langue digitale et les fonctions sémiotiques des contenus publiés sur Facebook. Les résultats ont démontré que les jeunes sont inventifs, créatifs, positifs, alternent entre les langues et les styles selon le contexte et publient des contenus très connotatifs et satiriques.

Mots-clé : Facebook, Communication digitale, sociolinguistique, variation, code-switching, Emojis, actes de parole, sémiotique, connotation.

1. Introduction

Language is a means of communication that undergoes changes and it is the only way to express reality (Cameron, 2003). So the study of language goes hand in hand with the study of the social reality it reflects. With the emergence of the new technological media, sociolinguistic studies are more and more interested in investigating the use of language and particularly the written language via those new means of communication. Social media play a pivotal role in language change because of the amount of language and interactions that happen via the digital platforms especially Facebook. The latter is the most popular social networking via which people communicate and the youths take the lion's share in Facebook communication and thus have a role in triggering and accelerating language change. With the advent of networking sites such as Facebook, change does not only affect the oral language but it also influences the written one because much of computer-mediated communication happens via writing. It is no wonder

that the conservatives of the writing system or as Crystal (2011) called them 'the prophets of doom' raise against the new media which in their view corrupt language and threaten society. But the change is inevitable so much so that the evolution of the discipline of internet linguistics is under way (Crystal, 2002). This study attempts to find whether language change that is happening under the influence of the social media is really a threat to traditional languages and the society by investigating youths' Facebook language and interactions.

2. Theoretical Framework

The investigation of the internet language or netspeak (Crystal, 2005) is still in the early stages of its evolution. Researchers in linguistics still apply traditional frameworks to analyse the computer-mediated communication (CMC). But the issue with the traditional linguistic models is that they do not deal with the multi-modal structures such as images and videos. The models adopted in the analysis of the data of this study are eclectic. First, the sociolinguistic variationist and interactionist principles of language variation (Anderson & Trudge, 1990; Herring, 2001; Spolsky, 2004; Holmes, 2013) are accounted for to describe the internet language at the level of individuals and interactions. Second, the pragmatic theory of Speech Act (Searle, 1976) is used to extract the functions of language on social media. Third, to account for both verbal and non-verbal forms of expressions, a semiotic theory (Barthes, 1972) is applied to interpret Facebook posts.

617) that such practices result from the users' intention to "economise on typing effort, mimic spoken language

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eatures, or express themselves creatively

Montes-Alcalá's (2007) concept of free switc

hing to explain the social

functions of code

-switching in the asynchronous CMC like Facebook status updates. In this case, code-switching

is employed for no apparent reason or it comprises an eclectic combination of other functions. Montes-Alcalá (2007)

also suggests that bloggers may switch to create an overall stylistic effect or signify that they are

co

mpetent in the use of two languages and two cultures.

From a variationist and interactionist point of view, younger speakers tend to use more of the newer and innovative forms, and the increase of a new form among the young people means certainly that this new form is being introduced or a linguistic change is happening (Holmes, 2013). The youths' language used in social media seems particularly interesting as a rich source of new linguistic and interaction patterns because most of today's communication happens on screen and both media and language are influencing each other with the youths being an important engine for such a mutual influence. The youngsters develop new forms of language (slang) to serve as markers of their social group membership. According to Splosky (2004) this kind of language or slang is marked by its rejection of formal rules and its marked use to claim solidarity. Anderson and Trudge (1990) describe slang as being creative, vivid, colourful and linguistically interesting. When social group members coin new linguistic forms, they are trying to formulate their identities within the socio-economic changes in the global sphere (El FalaKy, 2015). Digital platforms such as Facebook offer the youngsters new possibilities to use language. Montes-Alcalá (2007) commenting on code switching on facebook pointed out that the youths may switch to create an overall stylistic effect or signify that they are competent in the use of languages and or express themselves creatively or for no apparent reason. The users also reduce and restrict the language and also invent symbols to refer to words. Herring (2001) argues that such practices result from the users' intention to economise on typing.

In addition to linguistic characteristics of the youths' language in social media, sociolinguistics is also concerned with the functions of language. In this regard, the most important theory about uses of language is Searle's Speech Act Theory which divides language according to its illocutionary function into five types namely, (1) *assertives* which are those kinds of speech acts that state what a speaker believes to be the case or not, (2) *commissives* which are those kinds of speech acts that speakers use to commit themselves to some future action, (3) *directives* which are those kinds of speech acts that speakers use to get someone else to do something, (4) *declarations* are those kinds of speech acts that change the world via their utterance and (5) *expressives* which are those kinds of speech acts that state what the speaker feels. Some studies (Carr et al., 2012; Ilyas et al. 2012) examined the use of speech acts on Facebook status messages and found that the messages are mostly frequently constructed with expressive acts, followed by assertives.

Another important aspect of language is also its meaning beyond the words. Barthes, R (2003) developed Saussure's theory of sign into theory of semiotics in which he added the connotation meaning or simply any implicit meaning hidden within the text to which Barthes refers as 'myth'. Richards & Schmidt (2010) state that connotative meaning is the additional meaning that a word or phrase has beyond its central meaning (denotative meaning). These meanings show people's emotions and attitudes towards what the word or phrase refers to. Chaer (1995) divides connotative meaning into two important types: positive and negative meanings. Connotatively positive meanings make people feel good and the negatively connotative meanings provoke a negative emotional response of the reader/listener. In general, semiotics is a popular means to analyse media language to extract and describe the hidden meanings that show attitudes and feelings.

Linked to Facebook language, the researcher of this study intends to analyse the youth's posts and comments on computer to identify the characteristics of Facebook language as regards innovative linguistic forms, linguistic codes, interactional clues, main language functions and semiotics with the view to find out whether Facebook represents a threat to language and society.

3. Research Method

3.1 Data collection tools

The study employs a mixed research method which combines quantitative and qualitative investigation strategies to collect data. The quantitative strategy consists in using counts in terms of percentages and number of occurrences of a linguistic or a non-linguistic behaviour and the qualitative strategy consists in analysing the content and categorising it into generated themes. A total of 180 Facebook posts from 6 Facebook accounts were collected for the research. From each participant's Facebook page the first 30 posts were chosen making a total of 180 posts. The period of the posts extends from beginning to end of October, 2021. The materials (texts, videos, pictures) were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively using the following categories:

- (1) Categories of the communication modes
- (2) Categories of main innovative forms
- (3) Categories of main language varieties individually and interactionally
- (4) Categories of speech acts
- (5) Categories of major connotative meanings.

In order to have a deep understanding of some data yielded from the analysis of the posts, a focus group interview was conducted with university students taught also by the researcher. The main questions that were circulated to them concerned their linguistic choices and reasons why they lean to a given linguistic repertoire, in addition to some preferences in terms of themes and ways of expressing them on Facebook (see table 11)

3.1 Participants

The participants to this research are university students following different studies including Architecture, Technical Science, Medical science and English Language. Six students were selected from the researchers' own Facebook group friends to analyse their posts (30 posts per account). The selection of participants out of the researcher's own Facebook friends was purposive because it offered a high possibility to the researcher to have background about the people with whom the selected participants interact on the platform. This helped in understanding and interpreting some interactional clues such as choice of the linguistic code. The researcher asked for the participants' permission to investigate their Facebook accounts either through phoning or messaging them. Additionally, a class comprising 50 third year students pursuing English degree and taught by the researcher in the University of Algiers 2 were involved in a focus group interview to answer questions that were generated during the analysis of the Facebook posts. The participants have Berber and/or Algerian Arabic as their mother tongues and they were all instructed in Standard Arabic at school but are following their university studies in French or English. The following table displays important information about the participants.

Table 1: Participants' demographic background

Participants	Method	Age	Study Field	Gender	Mother tongue	Language of instruction in university
Participant 1	Analysis of Facebook Posts	18	Technical Science	Male	Berber	French
Participant 2	Analysis of	20	Architecture	Male	Berber/Algerian Arabic	French

Participant 3	Facebook Posts Analysis of	20	Architecture	Female	Algerian Arabic	French
Participant 4	Facebook Posts Analysis of	20	Medical Science	Female	Berber	French
Participant 5	Facebook Posts Analysis of	20	Medical Science	Female	Algerian Arabic	French
Participant 6	Facebook Posts Analysis of	23	Technical Science	Male	Berber	French
50 other Participants	Focus group Interview	20-23	English Language	Male & Female	Berber and/or Algerian Arabic	English

3.2 Research Questions

The study seeks to answer one general question with two sub-questions:

General Question: Does Facebook corrupt language and threaten the society?

- a) Which manifestations of communication and language change do occur due to Facebook?
- b) What are the semiotic functions of communication on Facebook?

4. Results from Facebook Posts Analysis

(1) Categories of the communication modes on Facebook

The participants' Facebook posts were first analysed in terms of their communicative modes. Four main channels were used: written texts, videos, pictures and a combination of texts and pictures as shown in the table below:

Table 2: Types & frequency of used communicative modes in posts

Mode Frequency Percentage

Written language	44%
Video (images+speech)	25%
Written language+tPicture	23%
Picture	16%

The Data in table 2 shows that nearly half of the communication on Facebook posts is purely written which means that even if other forms of communication are possible on Facebook, language remains the most important means of communication with the prevailing of the written communication.

As far as the comments to the posts are concerned, data also revealed that most posts go without being commented on and many are replied to by texting the sender and to a lesser degree by sending emoticons as shown in the table below:

Table 3: Types & frequency of used communicative modes in response

Mode	Frequency Percentage
No comment	50%
Written language (with or without other signs)	30%
Emoticons only	20%

Data above shows that the written language is also one preferred mode in sending back a response to the original message but it can be accompanied with emoticons and abbreviations in most cases. The mostly used emoticon is 'like' followed by the 'heart' and 'smiley'.

(2) The characteristics of the internet slang on Facebook

Now if we consider language only, we found that in many instances the participants abbreviate language and use numeronyms. The numeronyms that the participants use are of a particular interest because they use numbers for Arabic letters in transcribing the Algerian Arabic in Latin. These are shown in the following table:

Table 4 : Commonly used numeronyms

Numeronyms	Substituted letters	Examples
3	ع	3lach (why)
5	خ	5ali (my uncle)
7	ح	N7bk (I love you)
9	ق	9lbi (my heart)

In addition to numeronyms, abbreviations are widely used and most of them refer to French words and phrases as shown below:

Table 5 : Commonly used abbreviations

Abbreviations	Words/Phrases
C	C'est
Cc	Coucou
Cv	Ça va
Dcr	D'accord
Mdr	Mort de rire
Lol	Lot of laughter
OMG	Oh my God
Wlh	Wallah/والله
Nchlh	Inchallah/انشاء الله
Hmdlh	Hamdoulah/حمد لله

(3) Categories of main language varieties individually and interactionally

The written language was further analysed to study the linguistic varieties used throughout the 180 posts and interactions. Seven varieties were identified, namely: Standard French, Non-standard French, Standard Arabic, Non-Standard Arabic (Algerian Arabic), Standard English, Non-standard English and Berber. As for the Berber, only the Kabyle variety was identified and it is a low variety of the Berber language because the high variety is used only by specialized people in that language, so it is not accessible to all the Berbers. We distinguish between standard and non-standard varieties in terms of the use of formal and non-formal vocabulary and also in terms of the existence or non-existence of informal aspects such as contractions that make language informal and hence non-standard. The seven identified varieties are arranged in a descending order according to their frequency as follows:

Table 6: Language varieties & use frequency

Language varieties	Frequency Percentages
1. Standard French (SF)	71%
2. Non-Standard Arabic (NSA)	35% (13% in Latin)
3. Standard Arabic (SA)	30%
4. Berber (B)	7% (All in Latin)
5. Non-standard French (NSF)	6%
6. Standard English (SE)	5%

7. Non-standard English 1%
 (NSE)

Note that two or more varieties can occur in the same post hence the above values.

As shown in the table above, various language varieties are identified in the analysed facebook written texts with one prevailing variety that is the Standard French (71%) which seemingly equals in frequency the use of Standard Arabic and Algerian Arabic together. The fourth variety in this rank is the Berber variety Kabylean (7%) which is used in Latin alphabet but is less frequent than French and Arabic and it is used only by the participants who speak Berber. English whether standard or non-standard is also part of the internet slang but not very frequently as compared to the other varieties.

Another important finding in this study is that 25% of the language used is in the form of code-switching and code-mixing between different varieties with code-mixing (words of different codes in one utterance) being more prevailing than code-switching (a switch from one variety to another). As regards these two sociolinguistic phenomena, we identified 4 patterns of code-mixing and 6 others of code-switching at the individual level. The varieties are abbreviated as follows: **SA** (Standard Arabic), **NSA** (Non-Standard Arabic), **SF** (Standard French), **NSF** (Non-Standard French), **B** (Berber), **SE** (Standard English). These varieties are mixed or switched as follows:

Table 7: Patterns and frequency of code-switching and code-mixing at the individual level

Code-mixing patterns	Frequency Percentages	Code-switching patterns	Frequency Percentages
SF+NSA	4%	NSA+SA	6%
NSA+SA	4%	B+SF	3%
SF+SE	1%	SF+NSA	3%
SA+SE	1%	B+NSA	1%
		NSA+SE	1%
		NSA+NSF	1%

Data from table 7 indicates that the Non-standard Arabic, i.e, the Algerian Arabic is used alternatively with either its high-level counterpart Standard Arabic or the Standard French by a single speaker. When it comes to code-mixing, it has been found that in a single utterance a mix between the standard and non-standard Arabic is the most outstanding pattern with 6% then comes the mix between Berber

and French and also French and Algerian Arabic as second two important code-mixing patterns in terms of frequency.

If we consider the choice of varieties at the interactional level between participants in a single communication around the post, the analysis revealed 23 patterns out of 50 sets of interactions. Generally, the interactions involve two interlocutors with three turn-takings in which the sender has two turn-takings (at the initiative post and at the final comment) and each of the interlocutors may use a different language variety to address each other. For space convenience, only the four most frequent patterns are presented in the following table:

Table 8: Language varieties in interactions

Linguistic interaction patterns	Frequency patterns
Speaker1: SF	17%
Speaker2: SF	
Speaker 1: SF	
Speaker 1: SF	8%
Speaker 2: NSF	
Speaker 1: SA	8%
Speaker 2: SA	
Speaker 1: SA	8%
Speaker 2: SF	
Speaker 1: SA	8%
Speaker 2: SF	
Speaker 1: B	
Speaker 1: NSA	8%
Speaker 2: NSA	
Speaker 1: SF	8%
Speaker 2: B	
Speaker 1: SF	

Table 8 shows that the only patterns in which the same language variety is used are the ones including French only (with 17%), Standard Arabic Only (with 8%) and Non-standard Arabic only (with 8%). This makes a total of 37% of patterns in which speakers use the same variety in interaction. The majority of conversational patterns in terms of language variety indicate the use of different codes (variety) from one interlocutor to another. Also, the more interlocutors are involved in the interaction,

the more patterns are obtained. For example in one Facebook interaction setting, the following pattern was obtained:

- Speaker 1: SF
- Speaker 2: SF
- Speaker 1: SF
- Speaker 3: NSF
- Speaker 1: NSF
- Speaker 4: B
- Speaker 1: NSA
- Speaker 4: NSA
- Speaker 5: AA+SA
- Speaker 1: AA
- Speaker 6: SF
- Speaker 1: SF

The above pattern shows that all the seven varieties are included in a single interaction comprising 6 interlocutors. This pattern also shows that the factor of solidarity is not consistent among interlocutors even if they are of the same age. Solidarity factor implies that people of the same age communicate with their own slang or variety. In this study and as illustrated in the example above, the language code sometimes is the same among the interlocutors and sometimes different. For example Speaker 1 and Speaker 2 use Standard French in their communication but speaker 3 uses Nonstandard French , Speaker 4 uses Berber and speaker 1 answers them in Nonstandard French.

(4) Categories of Speech Acts

In addition to analysing the structural properties of the netspeak, the functions of the posted language were analysed with the use of Searle's framework of the speech acts. The analysis revealed that most of netspeak language falls into the category of *Expressive Speech Acts* followed by *Assertive Speech Acts* as presented in what follows:

Table 9: Categories of speech acts

Speech Acts	Categories	Occurrence
Expressive (70%)	Satire	40%
	Greetings	23%
	Humour	16%
Assertive (20%)	Claims about the world	67%
	Informing	25%

The most important speech act is the one in which the post sender expresses thoughts and feelings about an event. The most important ones

are in the form of humour, for mockery or for fun only, and also greeting. Mocking at events seems to be the most important form of expressiveness and it usually occurs through humouristic metaphors. Most of the mockery language is directed to the country and its politics. When it comes to the second most important speech act that is assertive, the data shows that most assertive speech acts are in the form of claims and these concern what is believed to be the truth concerning matters like life, death, brotherhood, sisterhood, motherhood, friendship, good and evil, success and failure. These claims are part of morality language.

(5) Categories of major connotative meanings

In order to analyse the meanings conveyed by the Facebook posts, it is not sufficient to use linguistic frameworks such as that of Searle’s speech acts which relate to language only. To deal with the non-linguistic aspects such as videos and images in communication, we also used semiotics to interpret the connotative meaning. The data obtained lends itself to be categorized into two types of connotative meanings which are: positive or negative, i.e, meanings with good or bad effect. One semiotic ‘myth’ was identified through the posts and it is the anger against government policies. The study identified the following themes which are categorized into positive or negative connotations

Table 10: Types of connotative meanings

Themes	with Occurence	Themes	with Occurence
Positive connotations		Negative connotations	
Positive feelings and attitudes	50	Insults to public officials	2
Entertainment	50		
Criticism through political satire	20		
Solidarity	20		
Inform	14		
Advice	14		
Morality	10		

Data from the above table shows that most posts have positive connotation and that those associated with negative connotation are only 2 (out of 180 posts) and these are insults to public officials. Concerning positive posts, those expressing feelings and attitudes are the most frequent ones. The feelings that are grouped under this category have been found to be love, peace, hope, sympathy, greetings and tributes. The

second most important category of positive connotations is related to entertainment which covers fun, games, promotions, cooking and advertising. Another type of themes with positive connotations is solidarity with people in sinister, under occupation, with sickness, in poverty and also with animals under human threat. Another frequent theme which has a positive effect is the one which associates fun and criticism. 20 posts in the form of political satires were found to be very connotative and symbolic and they are constructed with the use of metaphors and humour and are very much linked with the cultural contexts. The post in Fig. 1 (extracted from a participant's Facebook page) is not about the price of potatoes, but it underlies the stupidity of a political decision to decrease the use of French in the country. Upon a political crisis with the French president Macron who made unacceptable declarations as regards the Algerian nation, the Algerian authorities decided to move forwards in the process of defrancizing the country. Many political satires appeared on Facebook to underlie the stupidity of this political decision making it clear that more serious problems need to be solved. This hidden political message is called in semiotics a 'myth'.



Figure 1: A post from a student's Facebook
5. Results from Focus-Group Interview

Table 11: Focus group interview's main answers

Interview Questions	Obtained Answered
Why do you restrict language on Facebook	1. Gain time 2. Short space to write in

Why do you use emoticons?	3. Be quick
Do you always use slang?	1. To express feelings
Which language(s) do you often use on Facebook	2. To express attitudes
Why is Standard French highly present on Facebook pages?	1. Often but not always
What are the most important contents you prefer viewing and posting	2. Depends on situations
Why political messages are mostly conveyed through satire	3. Depends on interlocutors
	1. Algerian Arabic
	2. Standard French
	3. Standard Arabic
	4. Berber
	5. English
	1. It is a prestigious language
	2. Using French to show competence in it
	3. Many feeds are French
	4. No reason
	1. Funny contents
	2. News
	3. Politics
	4. It makes it funnier
	5. It breaks the routine
	6. It attracts more

Data in the above table is congruent with some results obtained from the analysis of the Facebook posts and also justifies the use of some linguistic and non-linguistic clues. First, the rapidity of the computer-mediated communication imposes the restriction of the language. Second, emoticons are used to express feelings and attitudes only. Third, slang is not the only variety opted for; other varieties might be used according to the contexts. Fourth, the use of Standard French is linked to its social status and frequency in the Facebook feeds. Fifth; fun, news and politics are the most important areas of concern to the participants. Six, political satires are preferred in conveying political messages because they attract more, and make fun and break the routine.

7. Discussion

In the present discussion, we attempt to answer the research question in relation to the findings with giving appropriate interpretation.

1. Which manifestations of communication and language change do occur due to Facebook-platform?

Facebook is a medium of computer-mediated communication especially the written one. Facebook users have choice in using different modes to convey messages such as texts, pictures, videos or combinations of two or more of these modes. What makes communication in facebook different from face-to-face traditional communication is that users feel free not to interact. 50% of the posts go unanswered which rather makes communication very passive and very often unilateral. In addition, when users react to the posts they may very often send symbols or short messages in the form of abbreviations or emoticons because the technological device allows just short size room to text messages. Moreover, communication can be instant so users send restricted forms of messages to quicken interaction as testified by the interviewed participants. In fact, many linguists fear that the use of emoticons corrupts the traditional language and may replace it gradually. In fact, the fear that younger generations will permanently corrupt the sacred rules of language is not new and the only languages which do not change are the dead ones like Latin and Greek. A [Roman scholar](#) in 63 A.D. complained about an “artificial language” used by his students. This ‘artificial language’ eventually became French. Many scholars argue that emoticons do not threaten language; on the contrary, they add meaning to the written language in the same way facial expressions and gestures do. For example, the blinking-eye emoticon performs a similar pragmatic function as when a person blinks his/her eye when saying to a friend “*do not forget to invite your mother to the party*”.

In addition to emoticons, the study revealed a high number of abbreviations and numeronyms which have become part of the internet slang. A slang not accessible to older generation unless they get help to understand them as it happened with the researcher in this study. Some of the abbreviations are international like OMG (Oh my God) and others are local such as hmdlh (hamdoulah) and all of them are either in French or in English. Numbers replacing letters in numeronyms are generally used to substitute Latin characters which do not have their equivalent letter sounds in Arabic. This proves that this invention which has been conventionalized among the youths is not random but a creation that copes with a specific linguistic situation far from any threat to any language. Apart from using some non-linguistic symbols and abbreviations, findings showed that the written language takes the lion's share in terms of communication mode. The written language is present in the posts with a percentage of 44% and 23% in combination with pictures without counting written comments to the posts and not only that

but 70% of the written language is in the form of standard varieties which are dominant on Facebook pages of the youths. The youths then are not exposed only to slang and it happens very frequently that they themselves turn to use the standard languages. These findings can eliminate fears that computer-mediated communication endangers the language and makes it away from the norms.

One important finding to be focused on in this study is the frequent use of Standard French by the Algerian students with a percentage of 71% in addition to 13% of the Arabic slang transcribed in French. This informs about a social reality and identity of the youths who despite having studied in Arabic for 12 years in school, they lean to French as being a tool in the written-based communication more than it happens in face-to-face conversations. Thus, it seems that digital communication influences language choice in ways not found in speech communication and this is mainly due to the fact that digital communication is most of the time written and distant which gives more freedom and ease in using languages. Another particularity to digital communication is the decrease of the solidarity language in the choice of code. For example, the solidarity factor which imposes on the youths to use the same variety to show belonging to the group tends to disappear in the digital communication. The youths may use a standard variety to communicate with another person using a non-standard variety and, as shown in this study, code-switching happens more between the interlocutors than at an individual level. The use of multiple varieties is due to the fact that the global media gives the youths the possibility to access to multiple linguistic and cultural resources and this influences their language and identity. So we can say that the new generation has a global identity.

2. What are the semiotic functions of communication on Facebook

The semiotic analysis of Facebook posts has revealed three important characteristics of the youths' digital language and communication. The first is the positive connotations delineated from verbal and non-verbal modes, the second is the use of figurative language that is used to convey meaning that only people having cultural background knowledge can decipher and the third is the youths' political engagement in politics.

In terms of the type of connotative meaning, on the whole the posts in the form of language or other signs connote positively as most of them try to express positive feelings of joy, hope, and peace; and elicit laughter through comic videos, pictures and humouristic language. They also raise consciousness through morality language reminding about the

values of the society and inciting to be good to others, to stop caring about the materialist life and thinking about what is worthier in life. The posts also warn against dangers and provide advice about a range of matters like health, success and the unity of the country. When it comes to the posts with negative connotation, only two posts were depicted, which is statistically insignificant. Posts calling for hatred, violence, racism and sexism are inexistent. This is probably due to Facebook intelligence system which moderates content or also because of the users' fear that non-socially accepted language or visuals would offend the platform friends, who might include parents and family. Such moderation on the part of Facebook and the users' care about the network community create a place of positive atmosphere on the platform with a positive effect on society. One concrete example which proves that positive language on the social media has good effects on society are the slogans 'Silmia' and 'khawa, Khawa' which respectively refer to 'peace' and 'fraternity' have been dominant in the Algerian social networks the two last years. The slogans have eased political and ethnic tensions which could have resulted in an 'Arabic Spring' during the popular movement, Hirak, or an ethnic confrontation during wildfires in kabylia because of a horrific crime. Given such positive role facebook has played in our society, it would be unfair to say that this social platform spoils the youths and the society. On the contrary, through Facebook it seems that the youths care about their society and about their network friends and try to trigger the 'well being' of the community.

A second characteristic of the youths' Facebook posts is the use of figurative language through satire, irony and humour with the use of tools like metaphors and puns. Figurative language is a speech where speakers mean something other than what they literally say and it represents a deviation from normal language use. The use of satire through figurative language and symbolism is indexical of creativity and cognitive maturity. For example, Fig. 1 expresses a myth or a connotative hidden meaning that only people with an understanding of the social context can access it. Such connotative meaning is highly frequent on the youths' Facebook pages. Most of them are conveyed through political satires which express the youths' denouncing wrongdoings of political figures and cast judgement on government policies and public officials. This also is an indicator of the great involvement of the youths in the political life which was not really felt before the advent of the media such as Facebook. Before the Facebook era, politics was the domain of the older generation but now such media

offer an opportunity to both young and old generations to interact and get involved in political activities. The so-called Facebook generation is today able to reverse government policies as what happened in Algeria two year ago when this 'Facebook generation' has stopped a fifth mandate of the president Bouteflika. Again many political messages that come from the youths are satirical and funny making Facebook a tool of public education and entertainment.

Conclusion

The present study has shown that the social network Facebook neither corrupts the language nor spoils the individuals. It is a space which exposes the users to a variety of written materials in both standard and non-standard varieties of language. The standard varieties have been even found to outnumber the non-standard ones which strongly indicates that Facebook does not threaten the traditional languages and conventions. It is shaped in a way that imposes a creation of some signs like emoticons to cope with the computer-mediated communication which is rapid and instant. Semiotically, the Algerian youths' language on facebook triggers a 'well being' through expressing positive meanings and feelings. They also show a high level of creativity through the use of figurative language to create political satires in particular. Facebook has also empowered the youths who have become very conscious about politics and pushed them to use this medium as a tool to mobilize the public. Most of the time political messages happen through humour which makes content positively perceived.

Further research

This study gives new research directions to enrich the scope of future internet linguistics. The following studies can be used:

1. A comparative study of the posts of Facebook users of different ages
2. A comparative study of the posts of Facebook users of different gender
3. A comparative study of the posts of Facebook users of different communities

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