

Case Study of Language Preferences in Social Media of Tunisia

Anna Kashina

Ph.D. (Political Science)

Assistant Professor at the Department of Oriental languages,
Diplomatic academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation
kash_anechka@mail.ru

Abstract—The study aims to determine language preferences of Tunisians based on chat rooms of open Facebook groups, with the prospect of extrapolating this result to the trends of language practices in Tunisia. On defining, by means of statistical analysis, the percentage of language formations in communication macro groups (selected to be diverse in subject matter and social features), the research outlines reasons of language choice based on social characteristics of the groups. The article also reveals the problem of the correlation between the language situation and the state-language policies, which were determined in Tunisia by political discourse and after the revolution of 2011 actualized in the light of identification crisis. This crisis is evolving through the opposition of the Islamists (represented by moderate Islamic movement Ennahdha) and secular modernists. The first push forward the idea of bringing the country closer to Islamic values and carrying out the entire Arabization, while the modernists are pursuing the idea of infusing Western values and freedoms, making the French language a determinant part of "Tunisianity". Language practices appear to be far from this opposition, as most Tunisians turn in digital communications to the Tunisian dialect which is often recorded with Latin characters and numerals ("Arabizi"), leaving behind Modern Standard Arabic (that accounts for about 21% of messages) and French (7%), while English is only making its way (0,7%). Reflecting the national identity in language is viewed as the problem of defining the legal status of the Tunisian dialect, not clarified due to Arabic diglossia.

Keywords—Tunisia, language policy, Facebook, social media, Arabic, Tunisian dialect, Arabizi, identity crisis

I. INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the study is primarily due to the increasing importance of social networks in the life of Arab countries, in general, and the Tunisian community, in particular. It is noteworthy that the 2011 revolution in Tunisia was called a Facebook-revolution, and the Tunisian segment of users of this social network has grown up to 7.40 million in 2019 (with population of about 12 million), making it the most popular social network in this country [15]. At the same time, forums and chat rooms of social groups are a source of

information about news and events, as well as a platform for interaction of professional peers in different fields, e-commerce, etc. They are a means of communication, where messages are typed and usually in a free form, not subject to censorship and unregulated by formalities. Thus, social media chats reflect the current language situation of informal communication within a certain community.

The peculiarity of the language situation in Tunisia is characterized by coexisting of, on the one hand, the Modern Standard Arabic language and the French language for the purposes of formal and business communication and, on the other hand, the Tunisian dialect of Arabic or Derja for the purposes of informal and domestic communication. It should be observed that the local version of the Arabic dialect contains a great number of borrowings mainly from French and Berber languages. However, neither Derja, nor the French, nor the Berber language in Tunisia have any official status. Moreover, both the Constitution of 1959 as well as the new Tunisian Constitution of 2014 declare "Arabic" to be the official language of the country, keeping the issue of the Arabic language diglossia implicit. In turn, the Tunisian dialect (TD) also has minor regional differences (the coastal zone, the Sahara and inland areas of the country, the border areas with Libya and Algeria). In chat rooms, TD is sometimes recorded not with Arabic ligature, but with a combination of Latin characters and digits. This phenomenon has been dubbed "Arabizi" (or Franco-Arabic) and is due, in part, to the influence of globalization [12]. In addition, in the context of globalization and the corresponding policy of the United States and the United Kingdom to spread English in Tunisia, the penetration of the English language in the country has recently been remarked. In this context, it is reasonable to mention the following insight of Professor L. Sayahi from the University of Albany:

the delicate position of Berber, the diglossic situation of Arabic and the increasing efforts for Arabization, the regional and social variation in Tunisian Arabic, the presence of French language and the gradual spread of English among other

closely-related topics, constitute the core themes of research for Tunisian sociolinguistics [20:1].

The English language has really come to dominate global social networks, but how popular is it with Tunisian users? What is the language of chatting in Tunisia? What are the language preferences of Tunisian social media users? Are these preferences consistent with the state-language policy?

II. MATERIALS AND RESEARCH METHODS

The subject of this study is forums and chats of Tunisian users on the social network Facebook. The choice of this social network is justified by its mass popularity in Tunisia. The object of the study is the language preferences of Tunisian users of chat rooms and forums. The main objective of the study was to determine by means of statistical analysis the percentage of language formations in communication macro groups (open groups of the social network Facebook) with the prospect of extrapolating this result on the trend of the general language situation in Tunisia.

While selecting groups for analysis, we focused on social network theory, which states that people rely on their social networks for aid (e.g., information) and emotional support. In addition, Tunisia is considered a high contact culture, that is, a society with dense social networks inclined to frequent online communicating [16]. Therefore, in order to expand the source base and diversify it by the purpose of appealing to the social network, we chose five open groups, different in subject matter and social characteristics of participants. The first group, mkach5a.tn, is owned by fans of Tunisian football club Esperance. The second group, Des vrais Tunisiens (written also in Arabic, meaning 'Real Tunisians'), does not restrict users with any subject matter and only requires compliance with the rules of public ethics. The third group is the official page on Facebook of Tunisian Attessia TV channel, where the most active debates revolve around political events. The fourth group - Multaqā al-Awwal li-Huwāt Muhtarifi Tarbiya an-Naām fi Tūnis (literally from Arabic: The First Forum of Professional Breeders of Ostriches in Tunisia), has a commercial bias. Finally, the fifth group, Akhbār Qitā'a al-Taālīm al-Asāsiyy wa al-Thānawiy – Tūnis (the News of Secondary and Higher Education in Tunisia), brings together education workers to discuss their professional activities.

The chronological period for statistical sampling was limited to one week from 29 June to 5 July 2020. Since the groups selected for analysis enjoy varying degrees of popularity (the number of prescribed participants ranged from 1,000 to 6 million) and differ in the intensity of publications (from one post in two days to 40 posts per day), a random sample of 100 messages from each group was chosen to enable more veracity of results. The selected messages were classified based on language used: English, French, Arabizi, Tunisian dialect (TD) and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). If the message was written, for example, in the Tunisian dialect, but contained a French or English expression (language code-mixing), even written with Arabic letters (transliteration), it was recorded in all relevant graphs. Messages in the "mixed language genre" were particularly difficult, with reference to sometimes vague distinction between TD and MSA.

Therefore, the preference was to classify them as MSA. The messages corpus left out pictures, memes or video fragments, emojis, or other elements that did not have significant linguistic characteristics.

In addition, the messages corpus was compiled based on at least 10 discussion threads to eliminate the possibility of a narrowing of the user base. The main criterion for selecting the message was user profile information, which reported that the account belonged to a Tunisian living in Tunisia. Finally, with the help of critical linguistics' approach which focuses on the study of "language within its social environment", political and historical context [23:1], factors influencing the language situation in the country were compared to the statistics obtained.

III. RESEARCH RESULTS

The result of the statistical processing showed that 60.5% of Tunisian users of the social network Facebook prefer the Tunisian dialect (TD) as a means of communication. Should we add to that "Arabizi" (10.8%), which is also TD recorded with Latin characters and numerals, the positions of the dialect seem even stronger. The second most popular was Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) – 21.1%. In French were recorded about 7% of messages, in English on average – 0.7%.

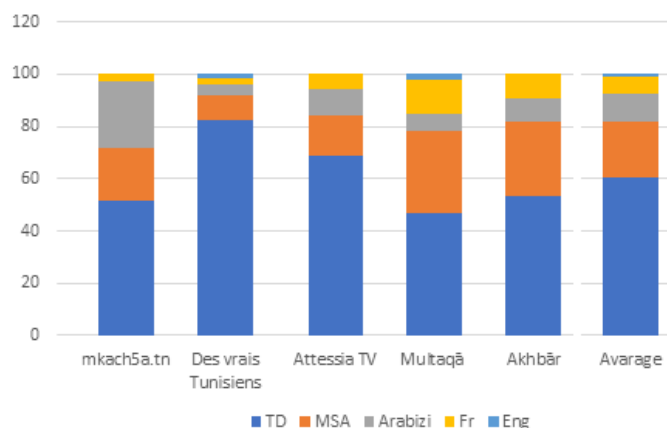


Fig. 1. Chart 1. Distribution of social group chats on Facebook by language preferences, %.

Despite the high proportion of French borrowings, TD dominates domestic communication, no matter what semantic field it concerns. Even issues such as politics or the intricacies of the educational process related to the sphere of official communication are discussed in chat rooms in dialect and "Arabizi". Undoubtedly, "Arabizi" has become a popular means due to a number of circumstances: it is more difficult to censor, as well as the dialect, it does not have a codified grammatical and lexical norm, and therefore does not give out the illiteracy of an author, it creates the author an image of a "contemporary and progressive" user, as evidenced by studies of this phenomenon, which lead to some other explanations of it [2].

The use of French implies a certain educational level, so it is almost not used in the chat rooms of football fans, while it is comparatively often used in groups related to education or

entrepreneurship. As far as English is concerned, Selim Ben Said rightly noted that “the trends of diffusion of English in Tunisia reveal that its use is ‘chameleonic’, appearing rarely but still adopting well to the linguistic ecology of the country” [5]. In francophone along with Arabic speaking Tunisian community English is only making its way and is mostly used in common phrases like ‘Ok’, ‘Good luck’ or ‘Happy birthday’ wishes, but not complicated sentences that demand a good grammar and lexical command.

IV. DISCUSSION

Let us now draw attention to the fact that the identified language preferences do not coincide with the language policy that is carried out in the country.

In Tunisia linguistic issue has long been a political matter more than a cultural choice [18:155]. Shortly after gaining its independence from France in 1956, the former protectorate did not hasten to break with the metropole. On the contrary, Tunisia did its best to fasten the diplomatic, political, and economic relations with France, which is number one partner for Tunisia nowadays. As well as it did not try to start massive Arabization at the expense of rooting away the French language. Neither were the series of educational reforms (of 1958, 1970, 2002) aiming at it when defining their purpose as replacing the pre-independence French-dominated situation or Arabization.

Taking into account that the national and official language of the country was Arabic and it was mentioned in The Constitution of 1959, so under the Education Reform Law of 1958 the six years of primary school education covered the basic language skills in Arabic, but French remained as part of secondary and higher education curriculum [17:11]. The Educational Reform Law of 1970 that imposed the use of Arabic instead of French in secondary education in a long run was not well received in public and resulted in massive resignation of teachers, especially of natural sciences and philosophy [8:18]. The main language of teaching of all disciplines, according to the Educational Law of 1991, is Arabic, but in high school almost all technical subjects are still taught in French. Perhaps the gradual change from a predominantly French medium of instruction to the sole use of Arabic was sought, but a bilingual situation would always prevail [22:112]. For the Tunisians French is the language of education, science, public services, business correspondence and economics. Besides that, the Tunisians perceived France as introducing the values and techniques of modernization, thus French was and is continuing to be an expression of modernity [19:44; 1:112].

On the other hand, MSA also had a kind of ideological priority in an Arab-Muslim country as the language connected with Arab-Muslim world [18:154], but it would not drive out French entirely due to a high ‘linguistic capital’ of the latter, in the sense Bourdieu has given to this concept [6], and to lack of what Professor M. Dhaouadi from Tunis University calls “psychological Arabization” [9]. Moreover, attempts at Arabization have repeatedly increased the influence of Islamists, who constituted until the so-called Arab spring a non-systemic opposition in the country. Therefore, the

opposition of the French language to Arabic and vice versa was mostly ideological. Propaganda of the French language served as a weapon to fight Islamists, and Arabization was either a response to disapproval of French policy or pointed against left-wing intellectuals [1:111]. Meanwhile the idea of national feeling, a sense of belonging to a nation-state articulated through the only ruling party (RCD or Constitutional Democratic Rally formerly called Neo Destour and Socialist Destourian Party) and its leader personified in the president [19:50]. So ethnical or cultural identities, that usually highlight language loyalties, in those conditions were not relevant.

The diglossia of the Arabic language was taken for granted, and in the course of language policies the state has never attempted to codify the status of TD as a “national language”. Its social status was lower than that of MSA or French.

The main shift in attitudes to language in Tunisia was connected to the period following the 2011 revolt and dissolution of RCD party. As for public policy and the educational system, the question of the status of language once again became a core one in the dominant political discourse [14:195]. But it should be noted that in political discourse the question of language has become closely intertwined with the issue of cultural and national identity.

The political discourse came to focus on the opposition of Islamists (represented by moderate Islamic movement Ennahdha) and secular modernists. The first were showing sympathy to the idea of bringing the country closer to Islamic values and carrying out the entire Arabization, highlighting the Arab-Muslim identity. As a result of the popularity of Islamists after 2011, analysts reported the decline of French language in Tunisia. During the rule of the parliamentary coalition led by the Islamists of Ennahdha movement, for example, in 2014 was adopted the new Constitution with its Art. 39 declaring:

The State shall ensure the consolidation of Arab-Muslim identity and national belonging to younger generations, the strengthening of Arabic language, the promotion of the latter and the generalization of its use.

Rached Ghannouchi, leader of Ennahdha strongly criticized that Tunisians have become Franco-Arabs: “We are Arabs and our language is Arabic” [14:195]. The result of Ennahdha domination is vivid through the fact that Arabic has now more than three times the number of French-printed newspapers in Tunisia [3:103]. Although projects like the one proposing to ban all shop-signs, plates or outdoor signs except written or transliterated in Arabic, caused heated debates with modernists.

The modernists are pursuing the idea of infusing Western values and freedoms, paving the way to democratic transit and integration into European and wider Western community. They focus on the fact that, throughout history, several civilizations enriched Tunisia and that this makes French a determinant part of “Tunisianity”.

Summarizing the above mentioned, we obviously have to deal with broad gap between identities. This feature Judy describes as following:

Collective cultural identity is so identified with language that it is commonplace to refer to those Tunisians for whom French is the principal language of public intellectual exchange and business as the partisans of French (Francisants) and to those for whom such is Arabic as the partisans of Arabic (Arabisants) [11:6-7].

What's more, under the new environment the conflict between French and MSA represents not only an opposition between two visions of the society, but also a quarrel between elites. As far as the fierce political struggle between these newly born elites is in progress, the future language politics is to be shaped, but it should take into account that the well-established bilingualism in Tunisia is an example of failed policy of Arabization, and any policies planned are anyway "influenced by public perceptions" [10:377].

In this context, the idea of making the Tunisian dialect an official language is noteworthy. Although it seems unrealistic at the moment, it could be realized with changing political discourse, for instance, to a more Western-oriented one. After all, TD combines elements of both MSA and the French language. Daoud describes Tunisian dialect as, "the only native language in Tunisia which is transmitted from one generation to the next" and it is thus closely linked to people's identity [7:39]. The variant of the capital's form of TD could serve as a standard for further codification, being more prestigious relative to other variations. Perhaps, there could be established a form nearing what is calls "Educated Arabic," that is "characterized by less formality, more syntactic and morphological flexibility and lexical borrowing from Tunisian Arabic" [7:8].

Absolute dominance of TD in the informal sphere means that although it still has lower social status relative to MSA or French, it is not a weaker language. It has not succumbed to full assimilation with the French, it is not threatened by extinction, inherited from generation to generation and it possesses the technical possibility of moving into the realm of formal communication. Noteworthy, the form of TD written with Latin characters, "Arabizi", draws parallels to the Maltese language, which is official in Malta and one of the official EU languages and linguistically close to the Maghreb dialect.

In this regard, another linguistic trend gaining momentum should be remembered – the very possible trend of replacing the French language with English in some domains. The language of globalization can become a real competitor to French, especially in the context of the policy of searching for balance between French and English, declared by moderate Islamists of Ennahdha movement, many of whom returned in 2011 to Tunisia from the UK, where they were forced to live for years in exile.

In fact, first steps to promote education in English, especially in such fields as IT, telecommunication, electronics etc., were undertaken in 1980-s with introducing of Technology Transfer Program financed by USAID that targeted scientific cooperation with Tunisia [22: 290-293].

Then in the early 2000-s the process was accelerated by computerization and digital modernization of society on the whole. By this moment English was taught at school as an optional foreign language. After the Educational reform of 1991, English became compulsory from the 8th grade, i.e. the second year of college, but it was given only two hours a week [13]. In the second half of the 1990-s evening schools for adults began to appear, it was an administrative initiative [3:40]. Then followed opening of English clubs in primary schools in 2001 and the opening of educational institutions to teach English in summer. Although these measures might not have been appropriate enough to promote English over French, they have made a definite contribution to strengthening the position of English in the education system until the situation changed drastically after the year 2016.

In 2016 the Minister of Education decided to prioritize English, instead of French, as the first foreign language learned at school. In September, 2016 The Tunisian section of the British Council announced that two agreements with the Ministry of Education of Tunisia were signed: the first agreement, related to the project 'Connecting Classrooms', which is to establish partner-ships between Tunisian and British educational institutions in pedagogical fields of culture and activation; and the second - "English for Employability". There followed other measures to give English the way. One of significant on this track is opening of Harvard University Office in Tunisia in 2017. Although there are no appropriate figures on the number of programs or courses taught in English in Tunisia [4:32], these programs will soon reap the benefits.

Most studies point to an increase in the popularity of English among Tunisian youth, who really believe that English rather than French is the best linguistic path that enables people to communicate across the world. Young people primarily use English, according to surveys, not for internet searches and not for communication within the Tunisian community of users, but primarily to address a global audience [3:84]. However, the present analysis did not imply the study of this aspect, confining itself to the need to obtain data on speech practices within the Tunisian community.

V. CONCLUSION

The statistical analysis of language practices of social media users in Tunisia demonstrate their favor to the Tunisian dialect over Modern Standard Arabic, French and English. The dialect often takes the form of Arabizi (Franco-Arabic). During communicating it is quite common for Tunisians to mix or change language codes. Existing practice reveals the failure of language policy, which was defined by political discourse and was not focused on free self-identification. As a result, the ideology and opposition of the elites led to the confronting tendencies of either Arabization or the promotion of Francophonie. However, the status of the Tunisian dialect, which is the native language of Tunisians, remains not defined yet. The issue of language policy and the realities of language practice have become linked to the identity crisis in Tunisia. The penetration of the English language into the language practices is clearly manifesting itself, which is accounted for corresponding educational programs, the effect of

globalization, and for desire of Tunisians to be recognized and understood by the world audience.

References

- [1] Abbasi, D. *Entre Bourguiba et Hannibal: identité tunisienne et histoire depuis l'indépendance*. Paris: KARTHALA/IREMAM, 2005.
- [2] Abusa'aleek A.O. "Latinization of Arabic Language in the Electronic Communication: Concept and Practice" in *Journal of Linguistics*, vol. 4, 2014, pp. 75 – 89.
- [3] Aouina, H. "Globalization and Language Policy in Tunisia: Shifts in Domains of Use and Linguistic Attitudes", Ph.D. dissertation, University of West of England, Bristol, 2013.
- [4] Badwan, K. "Exploring the potential of English as a medium of instruction in higher education in Tunisia". British Council, 2019. – URL: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/623468/1/Final%20KB%20Report%20%20Teaching%20for%20Success%20HE%20Tunisia%20Report%20FINAL_Web.pdf
- [5] Ben Said, S. "Chameleonic' English in Tunisia: A Third-Space Language" in *American Language Journal* (3) 1, 2019, pp. 35-50.
- [6] Bourdieu, P. *Ce que parler veut dire. L'économie des échanges linguistiques*. Paris: Fayard, 1982.
- [7] Daoud, M. "The linguistic situation in Tunisia" in *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol. 2 (1), 2001, pp. 1-52.
- [8] Daoud, M. "The sociolinguistic situation in Tunisia: language rivalry or accommodation?" in *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol. 211 (2011), pp. 9-33.
- [9] Dhaouadi, M. "Respecter ou non sa propre langue" in *Le Temps*, 15.01.2019. – URL: <http://www.letemps.com.tn/article/111851/respecter-ou-non-sa-propre-langue>
- [10] Fitzsimmons-Doolan, S. "Is public discourse about language policy really public discourse about immigration? A corpus-based study" in *Lang Policy*, vol. 8, (377), 2009. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-009-9147-6>
- [11] Judy, R. A. T. "Some Notes on the Status of Global English in Tunisia" in *Boundary 2*, 26 (2), 1999, pp. 3-29.
- [12] Kashina, A. "Arabic of Chats ('Arabizi') – a New Reality?" in *New Language, New World, New Thinking. Materials of the III International conference*. Moscow: Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020. – pp. 53-59.
- [13] Kashina, A. "Education Strategy of Tunisia" in *Middle East and Our Time*, vol. 42 (2010), pp. 50-73.
- [14] Kashina, A. "The Revolution of Freedom and Dignity in Tunisia: Great Expectations", Moscow: IME, Diplomatic Academy of MFA of Russia, 2018.
- [15] Kemp, S. "Digital 2019: Tunisia", Hootsuite, We Are Social. – Jan. 2019. – URL: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-tunisia>
- [16] Loschi, Ch. "Local Mobilisations and the Formation of Environmental Networks in a Democratizing Tunisia" in *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 18 (2019) [Issue 1: Weathering the Storm: Network Mobilization Dynamics in Uncertain Times in the Middle East and North Africa], pp. 93-112. doi: 10.1080/14742837.2018.1540974
- [17] Maamouri, M., Ben Hamza, K. "The Educational System in Tunisia. The case of Higher Education", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tunisia I, Tunis, 1989.
- [18] Monsef, W. *Ad-Daula wa al-Mas'ala Thakafiya fi al-Maghreb al-Arabi*. Tunis: CERES, 1995.
- [19] Murphy, E. "Economic and Political Change in Tunisia: from Bourguiba to Ben Ali". NY: Palgrave Publishers, 1994.
- [20] Sayahi, L. "Introduction. Current perspectives on Tunisian sociolinguistics" in *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, vol. 211 (2011), pp. 1-8. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2011.035>
- [21] Siino, F., *Science et Pouvoir dans la Tunisie Contemporaine*, Paris/Aix-en-Provence: Karthala/IREMAM, 2004.
- [22] Smith, S.L. "Nation-Building in Tunisia: The Impact of Education and Socialization", unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, New Orleans, 1973.
- [23] Spolsky, B. "Language in Its Social Context" in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 36, no. 3 (2005), pp. 254-72.