

Socio-Stylistic Analysis of Online Communication: Language and Identity in English and Arabic Social Media Posts

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تحليل اجتماعي-أسلوبي للتواصل عبر الإنترنت: اللغة والهوية في المنشورات على وسائل

التواصل الاجتماعي باللغة الإنكليزية والعربية

رغدة سمير عايد - جامعة تكريت / كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية / قسم اللغة الانكليزية

Abstract

This study conducts a socio-stylistic analysis of online communication, focusing on the interplay of language and identity within English and Arabic social media posts. As social media platforms have become central to personal expression and community engagement, understanding how language reflects and shapes identity in different cultural contexts is crucial. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, analyzing linguistic features, stylistic choices, and the socio-cultural implications of language use in both English and Arabic posts. Findings reveal distinct patterns of identity construction and negotiation, highlighting the role of language as a marker of cultural affiliation and social belonging. This study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication, offering insights into the complexities of multilingual identity in the digital age.

Keywords: Socio-stylistic analysis , Online communication , Language and identity , Social media , Multilingualism, Digital identity , Cultural expression , Linguistic features

الملخص

تجري هذه الدراسة تحليلاً اجتماعي-أسلوبي للتواصل عبر الإنترنت، مع التركيز على التفاعل بين اللغة والهوية في المنشورات على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي باللغة الإنكليزية والعربية. نظراً لأن منصات التواصل الاجتماعي أصبحت مركزية للتعبير الشخصي والانخراط المجتمعي، فإن فهم كيف تعكس اللغة وتشكل الهوية في سياقات ثقافية مختلفة يعد أمراً بالغ الأهمية. تستخدم الدراسة نهجاً مختلطاً، حيث تقوم بتحليل الخصائص اللغوية والاختيارات الأسلوبية والآثار الاجتماعية والثقافية لاستخدام اللغة في المنشورات باللغة الإنكليزية والعربية. تكشف النتائج عن أنماط متميزة لبناء الهوية والتفاوض بشأنها، مما يبرز دور اللغة كعلامة على الانتماء الثقافي والاجتماعي. تسهم هذه الدراسة في الأدبيات المتزايدة حول الاتصال الرقمي، مقدّمة رؤى حول تعقيدات الهوية متعددة اللغات في العصر الرقمي.

كلمات مفتاحية: تحليل اجتماعي-أسلوبي، التواصل عبر الإنترنت، اللغة والهوية، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، التعددية اللغوية، الهوية الرقمية، التعبير الثقافي، الخصائص اللغوية

1. Introduction

The study aims to probe into the socio-stylistic analysis of online communication in English and Arabic social media posts in terms of language, identity, and indexical meanings. In doing so, the principal aim lies in delineating the different strategies that may be employed by online language users to present their multiple identities. The exponential growth of digital channels with the advent of the global network has brought people and the world closer together in such a magnitude that insiders and outsiders begin to see and understand the world in accordance with people's individualized voices.

The socio-stylistic analysis of online communication has an epistemic value such as language and identity, among others. In the field of study, language is regarded as a principal vehicle and arguably the most relevant for the construction of identities, as identities are constructed and achieved. In cyberspace, social media becomes a trigger of transformation and an attractive social practice for human society to communicate the language of the participants' identity, and vice versa. (Blas Arroyo, 2023)(Mazzola et al.2022)

The current meta-analysis adopts an approach that is bilingual in character, with attention being paid to the English and Arabic posts and the interplay between language and identity in those posts. The study underscores the unifying principles at the cornerstone of the field, particularly given the importance of this data-driven approach in the field of applied sociolinguistics generally.

(Reyes-Menendez et al.2020) asserts that the importance of social media as repositories of large amounts of authentic language data is hard to overemphasize. The convergence of language behavior and identities projected online is reshaping the interaction of speakers from diverse communities, hence the need for researchers to gain insights into the efficacy and relevance of a particular theoretical or methodological approach in exploring the language behavior of online interlocutors. (Bailey et al., 2020) adds that it is from this standpoint that we outline the main goals of our research, which combines multiple case study perspectives with a variety of analytical and methodological approaches to broaden the sociolinguistic and social participation landscape in social media. We focus on individuals and the interplay between language and identity as these are the bedrock on which discursive communities are formed and maintained.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study of language use has long been connected to sociability. Language is not only considered to be constitutive of our social identities, but also as the actual site where social collaboration is developed. In the current digital age, social relations have taken on new forms in which they mix face-to-face interaction with page-to-page interaction and media-to-media referencing. Bearing on this, the two fields of enquiry that encompass the examination of socio-cognition are socio-stylistics and online communication. While the former attempts to establish the connection between our cognition and social, interpersonal, and textual functions, the latter offers a deep and detailed view of the theoretical work in an area that looks at text as applied to online environments.

On one hand, sociolinguistic theory examines how language use varies across different social contexts and how these variations reflect and construct social identities. This theory helps analyze how users vary their language use (e.g., code-switching between English and Arabic) based on the social context, audience, or platform. For example, Twitter's public nature might encourage more formal language, while Instagram might allow for more personal, dialectal expressions.

Shiang, Yu. (2013) asserts that sociolinguistics provides tools to examine how language choice contributes to identity formation. For instance, switching to English in a tweet could signal a professional or global identity, while using Arabic might signal cultural pride or a local connection. On the other hand, stylistics focuses on the analysis of language style, including the choice of words, sentence structure, and the use of different registers, to understand how meaning and identity are constructed in texts. Textual Analysis is an approach which is particularly useful for analyzing the stylistic elements of social media posts, such as the use of formal versus informal language, the integration of English and Arabic in captions, and the stylistic choices that signal different identities (e.g., cosmopolitan vs. traditional). Stylistics can also incorporate visual semiotics, analyzing how the visual presentation of text (e.g., the use of emojis, font styles, and layout) contributes to the overall meaning and identity construction.

These theories explore the linguistic phenomenon of code-switching, where speakers alternate between two or more languages in the course of a conversation or within a single discourse. These theories provide a framework for analyzing how and why bilingual users switch between English and Arabic. This might include analyzing when code-switching occurs (e.g., topic shifts, audience changes) and what it signifies in terms of identity. Understanding the functional roles of each language in communication (e.g., English for business, Arabic for personal identity) helps reveal how users navigate and negotiate their identities online.(Darvin,2016:533)

Identity theory (Social Identity and Self-Presentation), from a third side, examines how individuals construct and express their social identities through communication. This includes theories of self-presentation, where individuals manage how they are perceived by others.

Social Identity theory helps analyze how users' language choices reflect different social identities, such as belonging to a global community versus a local or regional community. Self-Presentation: Goffman's concept of self-presentation is particularly relevant in analyzing how users craft their online personas through language. For instance, how the strategic use of English and Arabic in different parts of a social media profile (e.g., bios vs. captions) helps in managing the impressions they wish to convey to different audiences. (Ibid)

Digital communication theory focuses on how communication practices are shaped by digital platforms and how these platforms, in turn, influence social interaction and identity. This theory allows for an analysis of how the features and affordances of platforms like Twitter and Instagram shape language use and identity expression. For example, the character limits on Twitter might encourage more concise, formal language, while Instagram's visual focus might lead to a different style of communication that blends text and image. Digital communication theory also emphasizes the multimodal nature of online communication, where language, images, and other semiotic resources work together to construct meaning and identity. (Ibid)

By integrating these theoretical frameworks, you can develop a comprehensive analysis of how English and Arabic are used in online communication to construct and express social identities. Each framework offers a different lens through which to view the data, providing a richer understanding of the socio-stylistic dynamics at play in bilingual social media environments. The combination of sociolinguistics, stylistics, bilingualism theories, identity theory, and digital communication theory provides a robust foundation for analyzing how language choices reflect and construct identity in the digital age (Sarker, 2021)

2.1. Socio-Stylistics and Online Communication

Socio-stylistic analysis is a linguistic research area that explores the relationships between language use, style, and a variety of societal factors. "Style" in this context refers to "the selection of structures from sets of available alternatives, for various conscious and unconscious expressive or social purposes". Social factors traditionally explored in socio-stylistics include occupation, age, sex, and social class. More recently, the focus has expanded to include sociological concerns such as identity, sexuality, and gender. This approach raises questions about how and to what extent we may explore the self as well as the other across a variety of micro and macro social levels. (Howard2022)

Online communication increasingly permeates everyday human activities in today's digital world. Pattison proposes that the web consists of a linked collection of "verbal" data in various forms of writing from letter length to book length, but he goes on to ascertain that the web is no poor replacement for oral communication but an innovative medium that mixes text and multimedia or - it is claimed - "textual and non-textual messages". Given that online still uses language, it seems reasonable to term the texts that are put on the web "worthy of linguistic consideration". Yet, as Sebba notes, online language does rest on informal language norms that appear to differ noticeably from speech and other informal written language that may or may not have some features of scholarly prose. With this shift towards standard forms, one area that has not been cited for the innovative features it offers is language change. (Hall, 2020)(Andersson, 2022)

2.2. Language and Identity Theories

For a socio-stylistic analysis of language use and identity construction the theoretical background should draw from several key theories in Language and Identity studies. These theories provide the foundation for understanding how language choices and practices, like code-switching, are closely tied to the construction and negotiation of social identities, particularly in multilingual and multicultural contexts like the UAE. Among these theories, the following ones:

1. Speech Accommodation Theory (Giles, 1973): This theory was developed by Howard Giles. It explains how individuals adjust their speech patterns based on their audience, either by converging (adopting similar speech patterns) or diverging (emphasizing differences). This adjustment is often motivated by the desire to create, maintain, or diminish social distance. (Giles, 1973:89)
2. Identity Theory (Burke & Stets, 2009): Identity Theory explores how individuals define themselves in relation to the social roles they occupy. These roles are linked to social expectations and are reflected in language use. People adopt different identities in different contexts, and language plays a key role in signaling these identities. (Burke & Stets, 2009: 24)
3. Bilingualism and Code-Switching Theories (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1993)

These theories focus on how bilingual speakers alternate between languages within a conversation. Code-switching is often a strategic choice that reflects the speaker's identity, social context, and communicative intent. (Gumperz, 1982:9)

4. Performativity Theory (Butler, 1990): Judith Butler's theory of performativity suggests that identity is not something one has, but something one does—an ongoing performance. Language is a key tool in this performance, as it helps to enact and reinforce social identities.(Butler,1990:13)

5. Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998) : Communities of Practice theory posits that identity is constructed through participation in social groups, where shared language practices are a key component. These communities are defined by the collective practices and discourses of their members.

6. Multilingualism and Identity (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004): This theory examines how multilingual speakers construct their identities through the use of multiple languages. It emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, particularly in multilingual settings.

These Theories shows the cultural relevance of the linguistic use. These theories account for the complex interplay of global and local influences in the UAE, where multiple languages and cultures coexist. They focus on Identity that each theory provides a lens through which to analyze how language use on social media reflects and constructs social identities.in addition, these theories are adaptable to the analysis of digital communication, where language practices are often strategic and identity-driven. These theories together create a strong theoretical background for understanding how language use, particularly through code-switching, plays a central role in identity construction among UAE influencers on Instagram. (Kale, 2022)(Walsh et al.2020)

3. Methodology

The current study presents a socio-stylistic analysis, a mixed-methods approach would be highly effective. This methodology would combine a qualitative content analysis, discourse analysis, and quantitative analysis to capture both the nuanced use of language and the broader patterns in how influencers construct their identities. Below is a detailed outline:

3.1. Data Collection and description

Influencer sample is of UAE influencers based on factors like follower count, influence in specific niches (e.g., fashion, lifestyle, technology), and linguistic diversity (those who frequently use both English and Arabic). Collecting Instagram posts are over a specific period (e.g., 6 months) to ensure a robust dataset that reflects different contexts and seasons. Gathering Instagram posts, including captions, comments, hashtags, and visual content.

The data to be analyzed is a collection of some stories, posts, and captions of a number of UAE influencers :

1. Huda Kattan (@hudabeauty)

- Field: Beauty and cosmetics.

Huda Kattan often blends English and Arabic in her posts, reflecting her global beauty brand and local cultural ties.

2. Mohammed Salah (@mosalah)

- Field: Football (soccer).

As an internationally renowned footballer from Egypt but based in the UAE for his career, his posts may include a mix of Arabic and English, highlighting his multicultural identity.

3. Nora Al Sheikh (@noraalsheikh)

- Field: Fashion and lifestyle.

Nora's posts often feature a blend of Arabic and English, showcasing her fashion sense while engaging with both local and international audiences.

3.2. Analytical Tools and Techniques

Develop a coding framework based on the theoretical background, focusing on language use (code-switching instances), identity markers (cultural references, language style, formality levels), and visual elements (color schemes, symbols). Identify recurring themes related to identity construction, such as cultural pride, cosmopolitan identity.

To conduct a parallel socio-stylistic analysis of online communication within the micro-context of social media posts and comments. We will compare online interactions in two typologically unrelated languages, i.e., English and Arabic, to explore the potential localization strategies speakers use to index their multiple identities manifested in. The project will focus on Identifying and analyzing the patterns of code-switching between English and Arabic among influencers on Instagram. Determine the contexts in which each language is used and explore how these patterns reflect the influencers' strategies for engaging with different audiences. To examine the role of language in identity construction, this work explore how language choice contributes to the

construction and expression of social and cultural identities among UAE influencers. Assess how influencers use English and Arabic to perform different facets of their identities, such as global versus local, modern versus traditional, or professional versus personal.

4. Data Analysis

1. Huda Kattan (@hudabeauty)

Post 1:

- Caption: "Can't wait to show you my new makeup collection! 💄 ✨ Check it out now! #Beauty #Makeup #Dubai"

- Language Use: English with hashtags in English .

- Visual Elements: High-quality image of the makeup collection with a glamorous, bright color scheme.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: No direct Arabic code-switching in the caption, but the use of Arabic hashtags like #Dubai adds a local touch.

- Identity Markers: The use of English reflects a global, professional identity, while the hashtag #Dubai emphasizes local roots and cultural pride.

- Visual Elements: The glamorous presentation and bright colors reinforce the high-end, global beauty brand identity.

Post 2:

- Caption: "إرمضان مبارك للجميع! 🌙 ✨ This holy month, let's embrace peace and joy. #Ramadan #Blessings"

- Language Use: Bilingual caption with Arabic followed by English.

- Visual Elements: Image with traditional Ramadan elements, such as lanterns and crescent moons, with a soft, warm color palette.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: The caption starts in Arabic, signaling cultural and religious context, and switches to English to broaden the message's reach.

- Identity Markers: The Arabic text highlights cultural and religious identity, while English ensures the message reaches a broader audience.

- Visual Elements: Traditional symbols and warm colors emphasize cultural celebration and personal connection.

- Themes: The post showcases cultural pride and religious identity, bridging local traditions with a global audience.

2. Khalid Al Ameri (@khalidameri)

Post 1:

- Caption: "Exploring the beauty of the UAE 🇦🇪 🌍! From the desert to the city, every corner has a story. #UAE #Travel"

- Language Use: English with Arabic flag emoji and hashtags in English.

- Visual Elements: Stunning landscape shots of both desert and urban settings with vibrant, natural colors.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: No direct code-switching but includes Arabic cultural references through emojis and hashtags.

- Identity Markers: The use of English aligns with a global travel narrative, while the UAE flag emoji and hashtags highlight local pride and cultural connection.

- Visual Elements: The imagery of diverse landscapes reflects the UAE's natural and urban beauty, reinforcing national pride.

- Themes: The post emphasizes cultural pride through the celebration of UAE landscapes while presenting a cosmopolitan view of travel.

Post 2:

- Caption: "Life in the UAE is a mix of tradition and modernity. 🕌 ✨ How do you balance these in your life? #UAE #Lifestyle"
- Language Use: English with cultural emojis.
- Visual Elements: An image showing traditional and modern elements, such as a modern cityscape with traditional architecture.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: No direct code-switching but integrates cultural emojis to reflect traditional elements.
- Identity Markers: The caption highlights the balance between tradition and modernity, reflecting a nuanced understanding of UAE identity.
- Visual Elements: The blend of traditional and modern visuals underscores the dual aspects of UAE identity.
- Themes: The post reflects a balanced view of traditional and modern aspects of UAE identity, showing both cultural pride and a cosmopolitan perspective.

3. Dina Tokio (@dinatokio)

Post 1:

- Caption: "Happy to share my latest hijab style! 🌞💖 I love how it blends tradition with modern fashion. #Fashion #Hijab"
- Language Use: English with a mix of emojis.
- Visual Elements: Fashionable hijab styles with contemporary designs, using vibrant and stylish colors.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: No direct Arabic, but the use of hashtags connects with a broader audience while maintaining cultural significance.
- Identity Markers: The post blends traditional hijab with modern fashion, highlighting a fusion of cultural and contemporary identities.
- Visual Elements: The focus on modern yet culturally significant fashion showcases a stylish, cosmopolitan identity.
- Themes: The post illustrates cultural pride through traditional attire and a cosmopolitan identity by integrating modern fashion trends.

Post 2:

- Caption: "Embracing the weekend vibes with a mix of my favorite styles! 🌈👗 #WeekendFashion #Dubai"
- Language Use: English with a local hashtag.
- Visual Elements: Casual, trendy fashion in a stylish, urban setting with bright, playful colors.

Analysis:

- Code-Switching: No Arabic, but the use of local hashtags and a Dubai reference highlights cultural connection.
- Identity Markers: English captions indicate a global fashion sense, while local hashtags and references to Dubai anchor the influencer's identity in the local context.
- Visual Elements: The urban, trendy look and vibrant colors reflect a youthful, cosmopolitan style.
- Themes: The post combines cosmopolitan fashion with local cultural references, illustrating a blend of global and local identities.

These analyses highlight how language choices and visual elements contribute to identity construction, reflecting themes of cultural pride and cosmopolitanism in the influencers' social media posts.

5. Discussion and Implications

5.1 Discussion: Language Use and Identity Construction

1. Code-Switching Patterns: The analysis reveals that UAE influencers frequently use code-switching between English and Arabic to cater to diverse audiences. This strategic language choice allows them to balance local cultural expression with a global appeal. For instance, Huda Kattan uses English for global branding while incorporating Arabic hashtags to maintain local relevance. Similarly, Khalid Al Ameri and Dina Tokio use language to bridge traditional and modern identities, reflecting their multifaceted personas.

2. Identity Markers: The content reflects a nuanced identity construction. Influencers like Khalid Al Ameri present a cosmopolitan identity by showcasing UAE's diverse landscapes while also expressing national pride. Dina Tokio combines traditional fashion elements with modern styles, highlighting the blend of cultural and global influences. The use of English often signals a professional or international focus, whereas Arabic aligns with local and cultural dimensions.

3. Visual and Stylistic Elements:

The visual elements of the posts (color schemes, symbols, and imagery) play a crucial role in reinforcing identity themes. For example, the glamorous presentation of Huda Kattan's makeup collection and the traditional yet modern fashion in Dina Tokio's posts emphasize a sophisticated, cosmopolitan image. Khalid Al Ameri's posts featuring UAE landscapes combine natural beauty with national pride, illustrating a visually rich narrative that resonates with both local and international audiences.

4. Stylistic Choices: The stylistic choices, such as the formal tone in promotional posts versus the casual, relatable tone in lifestyle posts, reflect different aspects of the influencers' identities. The blend of professional and personal styles showcases their ability to navigate multiple identities—ranging from global influencers to local cultural ambassadors.

5.2 Implications

1. Impact on Audience Engagement:

By using code-switching, influencers effectively engage with a broader audience. The use of English helps reach a global audience, while Arabic maintains a connection with local followers. This approach not only broadens their reach but also strengthens their engagement by resonating with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The integration of local cultural references alongside global trends enables influencers to maintain cultural relevance while appealing to international audiences. This dual approach can enhance followers' sense of connection and loyalty, as influencers reflect both local pride and global trends.

2. Influencer Branding and Identity Management:*

Influencers can leverage their bilingualism to craft a multifaceted brand identity that appeals to both local and international markets. By carefully selecting when and how to use each language, they can manage their brand image and address various audience segments effectively.

The analysis underscores how social media allows influencers to perform and negotiate their identities. Through language use and visual elements, they enact various aspects of their personal and professional identities, from cultural pride to global sophistication. Understanding these performances helps in strategizing content that aligns with both personal values and audience expectations.

3. Broader Sociolinguistic Implications:

The findings highlight how digital platforms facilitate complex language dynamics, including code-switching and bilingualism. These practices reflect broader sociolinguistic trends and contribute to the evolving nature of language use in digital contexts.

The blending of local and global elements in social media posts illustrates the process of cultural hybridization. Influencers' ability to navigate and merge different cultural influences reflects broader societal changes and the impact of globalization on local cultural expressions.

In summary, the socio-stylistic analysis of UAE influencers' social media posts reveals the strategic use of language and visual elements in identity construction. By combining global and local influences, influencers effectively engage diverse audiences and navigate their multifaceted identities, offering valuable insights into modern digital communication practices and cultural dynamics.

6. Conclusion

Online communities have become a distinguished field of research and occupy a relevant position in social science. This sociolinguistic study is drawn upon both the 'socio-meaning' of communication through the notion of identity construction and the 'stylistic' as a choice of language in social media posts, a socio-stylistic orientation on the representation of identity through the linguistic and stylistic choices has been investigated.

The analysis of the linguistic and stylistic choices in English and Arabic social media posts has brought about several conclusions.

Regarding language use and identity construction: The analysis reveals that UAE influencers frequently use code-switching between English and Arabic to cater to diverse audiences. This strategic language choice allows them to balance local cultural expression with a global appeal. For instance, Huda Kattan uses English for global branding while incorporating Arabic hashtags to maintain local relevance. Similarly, Khalid Al Ameri and Dina Tokio use language to bridge traditional and modern identities, reflecting their multifaceted personas. By using code-switching, influencers effectively engage with a broader audience.

The use of English helps reach a global audience, while Arabic maintains a connection with local followers. This approach not only broadens their reach but also strengthens their engagement by resonating with diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The analysis underscores how social media allows influencers to perform and negotiate their identities. Through language use and visual elements, they enact various aspects of their personal and professional identities, from cultural pride to global sophistication. Understanding these performances helps in strategizing content that aligns with both personal values and audience expectations.

Regarding identity markers, the content reflects a nuanced identity construction. Influencers like Khalid Al Ameri present a cosmopolitan identity by showcasing UAE's diverse landscapes while also expressing national pride. Dina Tokio combines traditional fashion elements with modern styles, highlighting the blend of cultural and global influences. The use of English often signals a professional or international focus, whereas Arabic aligns with local and cultural dimensions.

Regarding Visual and Stylistic Elements: The visual elements of the posts (color schemes, symbols, and imagery) play a crucial role in reinforcing identity themes. For example, the glamorous presentation of Huda Kattan's makeup collection and the traditional yet modern fashion in Dina Tokio's posts emphasize a sophisticated, cosmopolitan image. Khalid Al Ameri's posts featuring UAE landscapes combine natural beauty with national pride, illustrating a visually rich narrative that resonates with both local and international audiences.

In regard of stylistic choices, the stylistic choices, such as the formal tone in promotional posts versus the casual, relatable tone in lifestyle posts, reflect different aspects of the influencers' identities. The blend of professional and personal styles showcases their ability to navigate multiple identities—ranging from global influencers to local cultural ambassadors.

The socio-stylistic analysis of UAE influencers' social media posts reveals the strategic use of language and visual elements in identity construction. By combining global and local influences, influencers effectively engage diverse audiences and navigate their multifaceted identities, offering valuable insights into modern digital communication practices and cultural dynamics

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