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## A Structural Description of the Language of Social Networks in Morocco

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### **Abstract:**

*The great outburst in the use of Internet all over the world has led to the emergence of a number of social changes in connection with communication between people, its efficiency, its extent and its channels. Social networking, the use of online social media platforms to connect with people, provides channels which make communication possible everywhere. One of the major social changes that emerged with the advent of social networks is reflected in the language people use to communicate through these networks. This paper is an attempt to describe certain aspects of this language as they appear in the written exchanges between a group of young social media users in the city of Marrakech. Excerpts of this language are analyzed with the objective of identifying its structural features and its impact on the linguistic behaviour of its users. The findings have shown that this form of language exhibits specific linguistic characteristics, which make it a full-fledged variety.*

**Keywords:** Social networks, language, structural features, variety

### **1. Introduction**

Information Communication Technology, also known as ICT, refers to the new technological devices that are used for communication in the world today. Thanks to its efficiency in sending, receiving and processing information, ICT has profoundly changed the way people communicate and has greatly influenced human language itself in many ways. ICT is used to refer to the four channels which have witnessed the greatest advances in communication, namely, mobile telephony, radio, television and Internet. The different platforms of information transfer that are offered by the Internet, such as Facebook, Instagram, X, YouTube, WhatsApp and WeChat, among others, are commonly referred to as social media or social networks. They are used by about 4.7 billion people, 60% of the world population, who communicate and share information on the Internet through mobile phones and computers (CALD, 2023). Social networks provide opportunities for people, mostly young and teenagers, to "share, co-create, discuss and modify user-generated media content" (Kietzman, 2012). Indeed, creating, sharing and exchanging information are the key components that make up the concept of social networks. Individuals, groups, organizations and countries use social networks to communicate, establish community relationships and disseminate information across the world. At the center of all these activities lies language. The language used by social networks differs from the language used by speakers in everyday interactions or the one used for written purposes. The former is characterized by a number of features, such as the use of acronyms, transliteration, colloquialisms, word reduction, abbreviations, use of figures and iconic forms, etc.

Communication through social networking is defined as virtual communication that is performed through computers. According to Crystal (2011), online communication can be (i) synchronous when it involves people interacting through computers at the same time, as is the case with webinars and chat rooms or (ii) asynchronous when people communicate through computers at different times as in the case of emails and blogs. Synchronous forms of communication are most often more speech-like, while asynchronous forms are writing-like. Internet language is often described in the literature as "written speech". This is, indeed, one of the Internet's achievements, i.e., to allow speech, most often the vernacular, to be used in writing and make society accept this situation (Zakhir, 2018).

The term "netspeak", coined by Crystal (2001), refers to a form of language "displaying features that are unique to the Internet, [...] arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive" (Crystal, 2001: 18). It is considered as a variety of language which exists in different forms such as the language of emails, characterized by the use of headings, signatures, quotations, etc. and the language of chatgroups, which is characterized by the use of colloquialisms and non-standard forms of language. Online communication has allowed people to express themselves using new orthographies, different combinations of symbols found on the keyboard to express various emotions through various types of graphic representation (specific spelling using figures to represent certain sounds), iconic representation (use of emoticons), alternate use of more than one language, etc. (Crystal, 2011).

In Morocco, the advent of social networks a few decades ago and the new technologies of communication, the Internet and mobile phones in particular, launched a profound change in both the nature of communication between speakers and the languages they use to communicate. Newly devised forms of language are used to communicate through social networks, especially by the younger generation. Moroccan Arabic, Amazigh, and French are frequently used to text on mobile phones. Facebook remains the social network that is used by most Moroccan users. As Euler (2013) indicates, "the Arab Social Media Report released a penetration rate of 11.92% for Facebook in Morocco contrasted with only 0.08% for Twitter (North Africa United, 2012). Other social networking sites pale in comparison to the supernova that is Facebook. While these percentages may seem low, it is important to remember the large youth populations. Currently, the majority of Moroccan users are under 30, and while there are still low penetration rates, the large youth population portends potential growth. The penetration rate stands to increase, and, consequently, Facebook's popularity stands to rise" (Euler, 2013: 20).

## 2. Methodology

The research methodology used for this paper is both descriptive and qualitative. It seeks to depict and describe specific aspects of the language used by young Moroccans on social networks. The data are written excerpts of messages exchanged through social networks by these youngsters. According to Creswell (1994), qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (Creswell, 1994: 1-2). Yılmaz (2013) describes qualitative research as "an emergent, inductive, interpretive and naturalistic approach to the study of people, cases, phenomena, social situations and processes in their natural settings in order to reveal in descriptive terms the meanings that people attach to their experiences of the world" (Yılmaz, 2013: 312). The ultimate objective of the description of the language used on social networks, which is proposed here, is to understand a social phenomenon, language in this case, through picturing the main features which characterize it.

## 3. Research Design

This paper used a "descriptive survey design" approach, which means that this researcher collected data from a sample of users of social networks and described certain features of the language they use. The choice of these features is based on this researcher's experience with the language of social networks as well as on previous studies which have dealt with the same subject. The results yielded by the descriptive survey design are derived from the description of the language samples that were selected at the time of the analysis. The approach is both inductive and interpretive in that it tries to draw information from the data collected and formulate conclusions.

### 3.1. Data Collection

As is said above, the data which are collected for the purpose of this study are excerpts of written messages exchanged by a group of individuals on social networks. As a first step, a large body of texts is gathered and studied with the objective of selecting appropriate samples which will be subject to analysis. As a second step, excerpts of written messages are selected on the basis of one inclusion criterion, namely, the occurrence of the language features which are intended to be studied. Ultimately, 49 textual messages are studied, and 41 of them are retained for analysis. The messages are written in French, one of the most preferred languages by young Moroccan texters.

### 3.2. Previous Studies on the Language of Social Networks

Zakhir (2018) has examined the impact of social media on students' and teacher's use of language inside and outside the classroom, more specifically, the way the new media of communication impact teachers' and students' attitudes towards Moroccan Arabic as a language of education and social media communication. The results have shown that the new media of communication have significantly contributed to the spread of Moroccan Arabic as a written language in society. Both teachers and students are reported to use this language to chat and exchange messages. "These new functions [of Moroccan Arabic] gave it an advanced role in Moroccans' communication. It shifts from an oral low variety to a written non-standard one" (Zakhir, 2018: 102).

Nwala and Tamunobelega (2019) have tried to identify the negative influence of the use of Facebook on students' language. The ergonomic nature of social media, Facebook in particular, and their easy availability are judged to be harmful to language use. The students' use of the kind of language which is characteristic of social media is said to have detrimental effects on their writing style in school. The students' writings are characterized by heavy use of "all forms of acronyms, morphological shortenings, initialisms, contractions and coinages/neologisms" (Nwala & Tamunobelega, 2019: 12). Crystal (2011) has a different view of the use of this kind of language by learners. For him, "the most important finding of the research studies is that texting does not erode children's ability to read and write. On the contrary, literacy improves. Strong positive links have been found between the use of textisms and the skills underlying success in standard English in pre-teenage children. Interestingly, the more they used abbreviations, the higher they scored on tests of reading and vocabulary. The children who were better at spelling and writing used most of the textisms" (Crystal, 2011: 5).

Kurmanbekova et al. (2019), in their "linguistic analysis of social network communication", have listed a number of features which characterize the language of social networks, namely, "anonymity, communication on the network which is carried out in accordance with the will and preferences of the network user, non-verbal cues which are used in addition to text to express emotion and online behavior deviating from conventional social norms, [...], unmotivated multilingualism, colloquialization, expressiveness, polycode, vulgarity, and cheapness of speech" (Kurmanbekova et al. 2019: 130). Colloquialization is the use in written language of lexical items from spoken language. Expressiveness refers to

the users' clear and expressive language. The authors point out to stylistic variation, multifunctionality, multilingualism and speed as major features which distinguish the language of social networks from the language of oral and written communication. Polycode refers to the use of graphic and visual symbols along with the words of natural language.

Crystal (2011) mentions some of the most remarkable characteristics of the language used by texters on social networks, such as "individual letters and numerals to represent words ("b" for "be", "2" for "two"), initial letters to represent words ("gf" for "girlfriend", "cmb" for "call me back"), omission of letters ("msg" for "message", "xInt" for "excellent"), abbreviations ("gd" for "good", "mth" for "month", "brb" for "be right back"), deviant spelling ("wot" for "what", "cos" for "because")" (Crystal, 2011: 5).

To face the need for words to express emotional states such as joy, anger, sarcasm and irritation, which are expressed in natural languages by way of facial expressions and voice turns, the language of texting makes use of "emoticons" or "smileys". "Emoticons are constructed by combining punctuation marks (sometimes along with characters or numerals) on the computer keyboard to represent emotions or semantic nuances such as happiness, sadness, or qualification" (Baron, 2003:

20). Together with emoticons, the language of texting makes use of "flaming" and abbreviations or acronyms. Flaming refers to the use of discourteous or obscene language. It is mostly associated with email writing. Citing Lea et al. (1992), Baron (2003) observes, "historically, flaming has been described as an intrinsic quality of email resulting from the lack of auxiliary auditory and visual cues in CMC" (Baron, 2003: 21). Abbreviations are normally used for purposes of gaining space and saving effort but, according to Baron (2003), they also serve to indicate the texter's group membership. Examples of abbreviations are "brb (be right back), btw (by the way), cul8r (see you later), gr8 (great), imho (in my humble opinion), irl (in real life), lol (laughing out loud), rofl (rolling on the floor laughing)" (Baron, 2003: 21).

An interesting aspect of the language of social networks is that it has penetrated many areas of natural language. Certain features of the language of social networks have become part of the language of young people. Lee (2002) pointed out that abbreviations, imprudent spelling, and chaotic grammar are used in both speech and writing by college students in America. The traditional form of writing, with its logical development and consistent organization into paragraphs, is affected by the erratic writing of the language of social networks.

#### 4. Data Analysis and Discussion

As already mentioned, this paper seeks to examine the language used by a group of young people in online messages on social media networks. For this purpose, we have opted for a descriptive analysis in which the structural characteristics of this language and its impact are described.

##### 4.1. Structural Features of the Language of Social Networking

###### 4.1.1. Transliteration

Probably the most salient feature of the language which is used in the excerpts we have studied is transliteration. It is the process of conversing a text, i.e., a word, a phrase or a whole text, from one writing system to another, approximating the pronunciation of the original text. It is, by far, the most frequent way chosen by young people to write online messages. Most often, it involves texts in Moroccan Arabic, which are written in the Latin alphabet. The data in the excerpts below are presented in the following way, i.e., the transliterated text is given between square brackets, the phonetic transcription of the text between slanted bars and the translation between quotation marks.

[drari ma ba ta wa7d daba ikhdem] > /ddrari ma ba tta wahəd daba ixdəm/ "boys now have an aversion to work"

[koulchi ba i7reg imchi ijib lfous] > /kulši ba ihřæg imši iżib l flus/ "everybody wants to emigrate, go and bring money"

[wakha 3arfin kain l machakil] > /waxxa 3arfin kajn l mařakil/ "they are fully aware of the danger of such an enterprise"

The text in Moroccan Arabic is written in the Latin alphabet, which the young people are generally quite familiar with. Transliteration here does not render the exact pronunciation of the text in Moroccan Arabic, but it allows for easy reading. It all seems that the receiver completes the text with the missing prosodic elements such as emphatization, gemination, stress and labialization which are not indicated in the transliteration. A kind of tacit agreement exists between the sender and receiver regarding how the text should be read. In the text above, for example, geminated sounds like /dd/ in /ddrari/, /tt/ in /tta wahəd/ and /xx/ in /waxxa/ are not marked, either by repetition or by capitalization. The emphatic sounds /ř/ in /i7řæg/ and in /3arfin/ are not marked either.

##### 4.2. Lexicalization

Another interesting feature of the language of networking is lexicalization, the process of adding words and expressions to the lexical stock of the language. This is done, in the case under study, through various means such as abbreviation, borrowing and clipping.

###### 4.2.1. Abbreviation

The abbreviation is the shortening of a word or phrase through the dropping of syllables or words from the original word or phrase. It is a major technique of word formation in English. Abbreviations may be contractions if they are made of syllables or letters or initialisms if they have the form of initials of two or more words. Abbreviations are used in the language of social networking as a device to save time by reducing the length of words and as an index of creativity. They are frequently used in texts written in the Latin alphabet, in which abbreviated words and expressions are most often borrowed from French.

[slm sa va] > /slm sa va/ "hello, how are you?"

[goul lih iji tds rah ma 3ndnach lwqt] > /gul lih iži tds rah ma 3əndna š l wəqt/ "tell him to come right now, we don't have time"

[khud liha rdv] > /xud liha rdv/ "get an appointment for her" [jamé ma nmchich] > /žame ma nəmšiš/ "I will never go" [kiksiksa] > /kiksiksa/ "qu'est ce que c'est que ça?", "what's this?" [3tih tt lbazar] > /3tih ttu lbazar/ "give him all the trash"

[tjs shab tjs] > /tjs shab tjs/ "friends forever"

[3ndk chi prb ana ma3ndich] > /3əndək ši prb ana ma 3əndiš/ "do you have a problem? I don't" [c bon] > /se bō/ "It's all right"

[c pa c koa] > /se pa se kwa/ "I don't know, what is it?"

[wa nta sahbi dima oqp] > /wa nta sahbi dima oqp/ "you're always busy" [lcam] > /lkam/ "merchandise, drug of little value"

[dir chouia d la pub] > /dir šwijja d la pyb/ "you have to make some publicity"

[qrat m3ana f lqadi] > /qrat m3ana f lqadi/ "we attended Qadi Ayyad high school together" [dima sib3] > /dima ssibə3/ "Sidi Youssef Ben Ali forever"

In the example [c pa c koa] > /se pa se kwa/ "I don't know, what is it?", an abbreviation is made through graphic reduction, a process in which a phonetic cluster is replaced by one grapheme. The phrase "c'est" is replaced by the letter "c". This replacement is not random, as there is a strong phonetic affinity between the pronunciation of the phrase "c'est" and the phonetic realization of the letter "c" in French.

Another instance of abbreviation is found in the clusters [tds], used for /tudəswit/ "right now", [rdv], used for /rēdevu/ "appointment", [slm], used for /salam/ "hello", [tjs], used for /tužug/ "toujours" and [prb], used for /probləm/. The choice of the letters in these clusters seems to obey certain rules. The first letter of the original word is always maintained in the initial position, "t", "r", "s", "t" and "p" in "tout de suite" /tudəswit/, "rendez-vous" /rēdevu/, "salam"/ssalam/, "toujours" /tužug/ and "problème" /probləm/, respectively. The reduced cluster retains only the consonants or some of them, and the vocalic elements are discarded: /tds/, /rdv/, /slm/, /tjs/ and /prb/ for /tudəswit/, /rēdevu/, /salam/, /tužug/ and /probləm/.

A unique example of abbreviation is provided by the cluster [kiksiksa] > /kiksiksa/, /keskəksa/ "qu'est ce que c'est que ça?", "what's this?" in which the whole phonetic construction /keskəksa/ is destructed.

The abbreviated word /lcam/ is used for the French word "camelote" /kamlot/ "merchandise of little value". It is used here with the definite article "la" /la/ "the", itself abbreviated and reduced to /l/. The word /pyb/ "publicity" is a shortened version of the French word "publicité". It is used with the definite article "la" /la/ "the". In both cases, only the first syllable of the original word is retained.

In the example [qrat m3ana f lqadi] > /qrat m3ana f lqadi/ "we attended Qadi Ayyad high school together", the abbreviated form is a whole word, not letters or syllables, which means that the abbreviation here affects the phrase not the word. The whole phrase is reduced to one of its components.

An interesting form of abbreviation is provided by the initials /sib3/ in [dima sib3] > /dima ssibə3/ "Sidi Youssef Ben Ali forever." This is indeed an instance of initialism, which is very rare in the language of social media and in Moroccan Arabic in general. The initials of the phrase, as they are sometimes written in some official documents, are used here as an abbreviation to replace the long phrase, which is not fit for a slogan used to support a football team anyway. Sidi Youssef Ben Ali, sometimes reduced to Sidi Youssef, is a district in the city of Marrakech.

#### 4.2.2. Borrowing

Another outstanding means of lexicalization in the data which are collected for the purpose of this paper is borrowing from French and English. Borrowing, also referred to as lexical borrowing, consists of one language using words from another language. These words are known as borrowings, loans or loan words. Integrated borrowings are subject to phonological and morphological modifications of the recipient language. Unintegrated borrowings are used verbatim, with no modification. The following are samples of words, expressions and sentences borrowed from French and English.

[filouha ma 7assa b walou] > /filuha ma hassa b walu/ "they tracked her without her knowledge". [piassa] > /piasa/ "pièce", "piece"

[dik lbafia kant zouina] > /dik lbafia kant zwina/ "he deserves the slap"

[kali blkhoubz 7tta tlga ma 7sn] > /kali b lxəbz htta t lga ma hsən/ "have some bread and wait for something better"

[mcha fiha houa ou dik lboumba] > /mša fiha huwa u dik lbumba/ "he was arrested with the girl" [3rftou viktım] > /3řftu viktım/ "he has been deceived, for sure"

Borrowings from French are most often subject to phonological and morphological modifications as is the case with /filuha/ "they tracked her", from the verb "filer", "track somebody, follow his tracks". The borrowed word /file/ "filer" is phonologically and morphologically modified and the pronoun /ha/ "her" is suffixed to it as a complement. The word /piasa/ "piece", used here to refer to a girl, receives the same treatment whereby the first vocalic sound (/e/) is modified, and the last one (/ə/) is replaced by the letter denoting the number in Moroccan Arabic. The word /lbafia/ from the French "baffe" /baf/, "slap in the face", is used with the definite article /la/, shortened as /l/, and the letter denoting number as in the previous example. The word /kali/ from the French "caler" /kale/ "stop, support" is used as an infinitive verb with the final sound /e/ modified into /i/. This word is borrowed from the French word "cale" /kal/, which refers to any object put against a moving machinery to stabilize it. It is used here in reference to the piece of drug, which is put in a cloth and maintained under the tongue. The word /lbumba/, from the French "bombe" /bōb/ "bomb", receives the same

treatment as the word /lbaŋia/. It is used here to refer to a "beautiful girl". The only borrowing in the list above which does not receive any phonological or morphological modification is the word /viktim/ "victime" "victim".

Concerning borrowings from English, it should be said that they constitute a small number compared to the borrowings from French.

[staipa] > /stajpa/ "autostop, hitchhiking" [kioute] > /kju:t/ "cute"

[koul] > /ku:l/ "cool" [mouvi 3la rask] > /muvi 3la řask/ "you must support yourself" [Jjanka] > /řžanka/ "junk"

The word /stajpa/ is derived from the English word "autostop" /otostop/ "hitchhiking", which is totally destroyed. Its use as a borrowing can be seen as an indication of the creative internal ability of this language. The words /kioute/ "cute" and /koul/ "cool" are both transliterated but they retain their original pronunciation. They are preferred to the French words "mignon" /minjō/ and "génial" /ženjal/, respectively, for the connotation they have as foreign words that index some sort of prestige. The word /mouvi/, "move" /mu:v/, is an interesting case in that it is borrowed as a verb of action which conveys the idea of movement, which is a requirement to support oneself in Moroccan Arabic. Movement, in this case, is used for work. As the adage goes, "Move so that you can be rewarded by God." The word /mouvi/ is integrated in that it is affixed to the complement /i/ "you" in Moroccan Arabic. The word /řžanka/ is used to refer to a type of alcohol which is consumed as a cheap drug. The English word "junk" suggests the idea of discarded waste material. The borrowed word is used to integrate into Moroccan Arabic phonology and morphology, which can be seen in its first sound being geminated and its last sound representing a number.

#### 4.2.3. Clipping

Clipping, also called shortening or truncation, is the process by which the morphological shape of a word is reduced by the omission of one or more of its syllables. Examples of clipping in the texts which are studied for the purpose of this paper are as follows:

[nchouf m3a lprof] > /nřuf m3a l prof/ "I'll talk to the teacher about it" [ghda f lafac] > /ğadda f lafac/ "tomorrow at the faculty" [ha 7na f lghesto] > /ha hna f lğesto/ "we are at the restaurant"

Clipping here is done through apocope, which is a process in which the final cluster of a word is dropped. As is the case in normal speech, clipping in the language of social networking serves the function of brevity and language embellishment. The clipped word is thought to be more pleasant to hear, more appealing to the ear, so to speak. This is the case of the words [lghesto], /lğesto/ "restaurant" and [lghesto u], /lğesto y/ "restaurant universitaire".

#### 4.3. Stretching

[slm papouuuuuuuuune] > /slm papu:n/ "hello Daddy" [merciiiiiiiiiiiii] > /meğsi/ "thank you so much" [iiiiiiiiiiiiih] > /ijjih/ "yes, definitely yes" [laaaaaaaaaaaa] > /lla/ "no, definitely no" Stretching is one of the most interesting processes in the language of social networking probably because it is associated with the texters' expression of feelings and emotions like love, joy, gratitude, etc. More precisely, stretching is used to express degrees in these sentiments. It should be observed here that stretching exists in normal speech, which is signalled by the mechanization of certain sounds and, most often, a change in the quality of the voice.

##### 4.3.1. Use of Figures for Sounds

[ba i 7reg] > /ba ihřæg/ "he wants to emigrate"

[l5dra dima l5dra] > /lřdra dima lřdra/ "the green one forever"

[3iniha f koulchi ma ta t3iach] > /3iniha f kulři ma ta t3jař/ "she is very envious" [m9l9 hi bou7dou] > /mqəlləq hi buhdu/ "he is always in a bad mood"

Arabic letters with no graphic equivalents in the Latin alphabet are replaced by figures which connote, graphically, the shape of the Arabic letter. In the examples above, 7 is used for the Arabic letter, ح 5 for the letter, ħ 3 for the letter ع and 9 for the letter ق. These figures are chosen for the resemblance they bear to the letters they represent. We can see that, in a kind of "mirror effect", each one of these figures has the reverse shape of the letter it represents.

##### 4.3.2. Significance of the Language of Networking

The language of networking, at least as it is examined for the purpose of this paper, is observed to serve a number of functions. Due to its specific nature, this language is cherished by its users as a language that connects people who are characterized by the same features, interests and life experiences. Its users feel that this language creates a community of interest which bonds them together. It allows users to identify with a group which has common interests, thus giving them a sense of belonging. Due to its use by the young, in particular, this language represents some kind of identity for the young generation. This is all the truer that it is not used by older generations. In the case under study, the community of users is made up of people who are of the same age, have the same interests, have the same access to electronic technology, and have the same feeling of belonging.

The language of social networking serves another function in relation to the way people use language. It is, indeed, observed that ordinary people make use of some of the forms which characterize this language. It is not uncommon to see these forms used in both speech and writing by a large number of people. As is well known, abbreviations such as /lol/, used for "laughing out loud" or "lots of laughs", and /omg/, used for "oh my god", have become part of people's ordinary language.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has tried to explore some of the main features of the language of social networking among a group of young people in the city of Marrakech. It has been shown that this language can be considered a full-fledged variety due to its linguistic features, which are specific to it. Some of the major features of this language are exhibited in its use of transliteration, word abbreviation, stretching and clipping. This paper has also shown that the language of social networking has managed to impact people's everyday language by borrowing some of its features.

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