

English Code-Switching in Arabic Discourse: A Study of Linguistic and Cultural Influence

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Abstract

This study examines the growing phenomenon of English–Arabic code-switching among bilingual speakers in contemporary Arab societies. As English solidifies its role in education, media, technology, and commerce, Arabic interlocutors frequently alternate between the two languages within spoken and written discourses. The primary purpose of this investigation is to explore the linguistic patterns and sociocultural motivations underlying English code-switching in Arabic, and to assess its impact on Arabic's structural integrity and cultural identity. Employing a mixed-methods design, data were collected from 60 participants—undergraduate students and young professionals in urban centers—via semi-structured interviews, recorded conversational samples, and social-media text corpora. Discourse analysis and thematic coding were used to identify intra- and inter-sentential switching, morphological adaptations, and speakers' attitudes. Key findings reveal (1) a high frequency of lexical borrowing and morphological integration of English items into Arabic, (2) distinct code-switching patterns tied to domain-specific needs (academic versus social contexts), and (3) positive associations of code-switching with modernity and global identity in young generation, alongside concerns about language erosion among older generations. This study contributes to the field of contact linguistics by illuminating how bilingual discourse practices both reshape Arabic's linguistic landscape and reflect evolving cultural values, offering implications for language policy and educational curricula in the Arab world.

Keywords: Code-switching, Arabic, English, Sociolinguistics, Language Identity, Language Contact, Bilingualism

1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, English has emerged as the pre-eminent global lingua franca, dominating domains of science, technology, international commerce, and digital communication (Crystal, 2003, p. 23). Its pervasive presence—through academic

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publications, multinational corporations, and online platforms—has led to the widespread adoption of English lexical items and syntactic structures in many languages. Simultaneously, Arabic remains the native tongue of over 400 million speakers across more than twenty countries and underpins religious practice, literature, and national identity throughout the Arab world (Holes, 2004, p. 12). The intersection of these two linguistic spheres has fostered complex bilingual practices, most notably code-switching, in which speakers alternate between English and Arabic within the same discourse.

Code-switching is broadly defined as the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single communicative event (Myers-Scotton, 1993, p. 5). Three primary types are recognized: inter-sentential switching (between sentences), intra-sentential switching (within a clause), and tag-switching (insertion of a lexical tag or phrase from one language) (Poplack, 1980, p. 586). While code-switching is a universal feature of bilingual communities, its manifestation in Arabic contexts is uniquely influenced by the language's diglossic situation—where Modern Standard Arabic (Fuṣḥā) coexists with regional colloquial dialects—and by the high prestige associated with English as a marker of education and modernity.

In many Arab societies, bilingualism is nurtured through formal education, media exposure, and professional necessity. English instruction often begins in primary grades and intensifies at the tertiary level, particularly within science, engineering, and business programs (Mahfoudh, 2011, p. 87). Concurrently, the proliferation of satellite television, social media, and mobile messaging has given rise to “Arabizi”—a hybrid register blending Arabic dialect rendered in Latin script with English terms (Diab, 2007, p. 60). These educational and technological environments have produced diverse patterns of English–Arabic code-switching among students, professionals, and digital natives.

Examining English–Arabic code-switching is significant for both linguistic and sociocultural reasons. Linguistically, it provides insight into bilingual speakers' management of dual grammatical systems, including the morphological adaptation of English loanwords into Arabic phonology (e.g., *ترافيك*/tarafik from “traffic”) and their syntactic integration within Arabic clauses (Henderson, 2013, p. 128). Socioculturally, according to some literates, code-switching functions as a resource for identity construction, signaling group solidarity, educational status, or cosmopolitan affiliation (Ammar & Spolsky, 2006, p. 52). Yet, concerns persist regarding its potential to erode Arabic proficiency and weaken language maintenance efforts (Fahad, 2018, p. 190).

Despite a growing body of research on bilingualism in the Arab world, there is a notable gap in studies that integrate formal linguistic analysis with qualitative exploration of speaker attitudes across multiple communicative domains. Prior investigations have often focused narrowly on either structural aspects of borrowing and syntactic integration or on sociolinguistic motivations via surveys and interviews, without systematically combining naturalistic speech data, textual corpora, and participant reflections.

The present study addresses this gap by adopting a mixed-methods approach to examine the patterns, functions, and cultural drivers of English–Arabic code-switching. Specifically, it will (1) categorize predominant code-switching types among bilingual speakers, (2) analyze the morphological and phonological adaptation of English lexemes

in Arabic, (3) explore sociocultural motivations underlying switching behaviors, and (4) assess speakers' attitudes toward its advantages and drawbacks.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Background of Code-Switching

2.1.1 Definitions and Types

Code-switching refers to the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a single communicative event. Three primary forms are commonly distinguished:

- Inter-sentential switching, where the language switch occurs at sentence boundaries (Poplack, 1980, p. 585).
- Intra-sentential switching, which takes place within a single clause or sentence, often involving embedded phrases or morphemes (Poplack, 1980, p. 586).
- Tag-switching, entailing the insertion of a tag or fixed expression from one language into a sentence otherwise wholly in another (Poplack, 1980, p. 587).

2.1.2 Matrix Language Frame Model

Myers-Scotton's (1993) Matrix Language Frame (MLF) model posits that bilingual utterances consist of a matrix language (ML), which provides the grammatical frame, and one or more embedded languages (ELs) from which content morphemes are drawn. According to the model, the ML determines the morphosyntactic rules of the utterance, while items from the EL must conform to the ML's morphological and syntactic constraints (Myers-Scotton, 1993, pp. 12–14).

2.1.3 Markedness Model

Also advanced by Myers-Scotton (1993), the Markedness Model views code-switching as a sociolinguistic strategy: speakers choose the unmarked (normative) or marked (non-normative) language variety to signal social relationships, conversational roles, or attitudes. A switch to the marked variety can index solidarity, formality, or topic shift, whereas the unmarked choice maintains the default social order (Myers-Scotton, 1993, pp. 29–31).

2.1.4 Diglossia and Bilingualism Theory

Ferguson's (1959) concept of diglossia—the coexistence of a “high” (Fuṣḥā) and “low” (colloquial dialects) variety within a speech community—provides a foundation for understanding Arabic bilingual contexts. In this framework, English often assumes a “higher” status for specific domains (e.g., academia, technology), while regional dialects govern informal interaction (Ferguson, 1959, p. 336).

2.2. Code-Switching in the Arabic Context

Historical Perspective

Early investigations into Arabic language contact focused on loanwords borrowed from Turkish and Persian during the medieval period (Ryding, 2005). However, systematic study of English influence on Arabic emerged in the late twentieth century, paralleling the spread of satellite media and multinational business (Rouchdy, 2005, pp. 4–6).

2.3. Previous Studies on Arabic-English Code-Switching

- Ammar and Spolsky (2006) surveyed university students in Lebanon and identified high rates of intra-sentential switches in academic discourse, attributing these to

gaps in technical Arabic vocabulary (Ammar & Spolsky, 2006, pp. 52–54). Although these terms could be defined according to Arabic speech as Arabic has the capacity to deal with such cases in a proper linguistic manner.

- Henderson's (2013) corpus-based analysis of Egyptian radio talk shows documented frequent tag-switching, with tags such as *you know* and *OK* serving pragmatic functions (Henderson, 2013, pp. 130–133). Fahad (2018) explored Saudi social-media posts and found that code-switching correlated with younger age and higher education levels (Fahad, 2018, pp. 189–191).

2.4. Influence of English on Arabic Vocabulary and Syntax

Loanwords from English have become fully integrated into Arabic morphology, often adopting Arabic plural patterns (e.g., *فايلات* “files”) and verbal forms (e.g., *مُبدت* “updated”) (Henderson, 2013, p. 128). Syntax is also affected: intra-sentential switches frequently preserve English word order, resulting in hybrid constructions such as *Lif need to study* *للامتحان* (“I need to study for the exam”) (Albirini, 2016, pp. 75–77).

2.5. Sociocultural Motivations in Prior Research

Diab (2007) identified pragmatic motivations for “Arabizi,” noting that Latin-script Arabic with English lexical items enhances group solidarity among youth (Diab, 2007, p. 62). Rouchdy (2005) argued that code-switching in media reflects broader sociopolitical dynamics, with English signifying modernity and global reach (Rouchdy, 2005, p. 9). Ammar and Spolsky (2006) further revealed that code-switching can reduce cognitive load when discussing specialized topics lacking everyday Arabic equivalents (Ammar & Spolsky, 2006, p. 56). And this lack is to be considered in the speakers’ perspective not in the language itself.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to capture both the structural dimensions and sociocultural nuances of English–Arabic code-switching. The qualitative component involves in-depth interviews, discourse analysis of audio recordings, and thematic coding of social-media texts to explore motivations, attitudes, and contextual factors driving code-switching. The quantitative component comprises frequency counts of code-switching instances and survey responses to gauge prevalence and demographic correlations. By triangulating these methods, the study achieves a comprehensive understanding of bilingual discourse practices.

3.2 Participants

Sampling Frame. Participants are recruited from three urban centers, where English–Arabic bilingualism is widespread. A purposive sampling strategy ensures representation across age, education, and professional background.

- Age: 18–35 years (n = 60)
- Education: Completed at least secondary education; 70% enrolled in or graduated from university programs with English-medium instruction
- Occupation:

- 40 university students (science, engineering, business faculties)
- 20 young professionals (media, IT, marketing sectors)
- Language Background: Self-reported high proficiency in both Arabic and English; daily use of both languages in academic, professional, or social contexts

Demographic data are collected via a brief intake survey to contextualize code-switching patterns relative to participants' profiles.

3.3 . Data Collection Methods

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.

- Duration: 30–45 minutes each
- Focus: Personal language histories, attitudes toward code-switching, domain-specific practices
- Conducted in participants' language (Arabic, English, or both), audio-recorded with consent.

3.3.2 Audio Recordings of Naturalistic Conversation.

- Two 10-minute segments per participant in informal settings (e.g., café, study group)
- Participants are instructed to converse with peers as they normally would
- Recordings transcribed verbatim for analysis of intra- and inter-sentential switches

3.3.3 Social Media/Text Corpora.

Collection of participants' public Facebook posts and WhatsApp status updates over a one-month period

Texts exported and anonymized; lexical strings containing code-switches flagged for thematic coding

3.3.4. Surveys

Likert-scale items (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree) on attitudes toward code-switching (e.g., prestige, identity, language erosion)

Demographic questions and self-rated frequency of switching in various domains (academic, social media, workplace)

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

1. Thematic Analysis.

- Follows Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework: familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and write-up
- Applied to interview transcripts and social-media texts to identify recurring motivations (e.g., filling lexical gaps, identity signaling)

2. Discourse Analysis.

- Utilizes Gee's (2011) discourse-practice model to examine how code-switching constructs social identities and power relations
- Focuses on speech functions (e.g., emphasis, quotation, pragmatic tagging) in audio-recorded conversations

3. Frequency Analysis of Code-Switching Types.

- Quantifies instances of inter-sentential, intra-sentential, and tag-switching per 1,000 words of transcript

- Statistical comparisons across participant subgroups (students vs. professionals) using chi-square tests.
- 4. Survey Data Analysis.
 - Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) for attitude items
 - Correlational analyses between demographic variables and self-reported switching frequency

Integration of qualitative themes and quantitative trends occurs in the interpretation phase, highlighting convergences (e.g., high lexical-gap switching correlates with positive attitudes) and divergences (e.g., older participants report lower switching frequency despite thematic endorsement).

3.5 Ethical Considerations

- Informed Consent: Participants receive written consent forms detailing study purpose, procedures, and rights, including voluntary withdrawal without penalty.
- Anonymity: All personal identifiers (names, locations) replaced with codes (e.g., P01–P60) in transcripts and survey data.
- Data Confidentiality: Audio files and raw text data stored on encrypted drives; only the principal author has access. Data will be retained until the research paper gets published.

4. Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Linguistic Analysis of Code-Switching

- Frequency and Types of Code-Switching

Analysis of the 120,000-word corpus (60 participants \times 2 \times 10-minute recordings plus social-media texts) revealed a total of 3,450 code-switching tokens. Intra-sentential switching was the most frequent type, accounting for 56% of tokens, followed by inter-sentential at 29%, and tag-switching at 15%. Chi-square tests indicated no significant difference in type distribution across gender ($\chi^2[2, N = 3,450] = 1.24, p = .54$), but a significant effect of age group: participants aged 18–24 used intra-sentential switches more frequently than those aged 25–35 (60% vs. 50%; $\chi^2[2, N = 3,450] = 15.37, p < .001$).

4.1.1. Common Domains: Education, Social Media, Workplace

When categorized by domain, social-media contexts exhibited the highest density of code-switching (45 tokens per 1,000 words), followed by informal educational discourse (32 tokens per 1,000 words) and workplace interaction (18 tokens per 1,000 words). In social-media texts, tag-switching was particularly salient in WhatsApp status updates (23% of switches), often serving pragmatic functions such as emphasis (*you know, right*). Educational settings (peer tutoring sessions, study groups) saw a higher proportion of intra-sentential switches—especially for technical terms by skipping the Arabic equivalents or abbreviations (e.g., *API, framework*). Workplace recordings (marketing meetings, IT team briefings) showed more inter-sentential switches, frequently marking topic shifts between project discussion and interpersonal rapport-building.

4.1.2 Impact on Arabic Syntax, Morphology, Phonology

Morphology. Over 85% of English borrowings were adapted to Arabic morphological templates. For example, borrowed nouns regularly adopted the *fa'ā'il* plural pattern (e.g., *files* → *faā'il* “فائلات”) and English verbs entered Arabic verbal patterns with the *ya-* prefix (e.g., *to update* → *yubdīt* “يبدت”).

Syntax. Intra-sentential switches often preserved English word order, resulting in hybrid clause structures:

ʔā need to submit the report بكره

“I need to submit the report tomorrow.”

Such structures conformed to the Matrix Language Frame Model: Arabic provided the grammatical frame, while English content morphemes were slotted in. Occasionally, English subordinate clauses appeared verbatim within Arabic main clauses, suggesting a loosening of syntactic constraints in casual registers.

Phonology. Phonological adaptation was consistent: English phonemes absent in Arabic (e.g., /v/, /p/) were replaced by nearest equivalents (/f/, /b/), and vowel length distinctions in Arabic were extended to nativize borrowed English words (e.g., *link* → *līnk* “لينك”). Tone and stress patterns, however, often remained closer to English, producing a perceptible “accented” register among younger speakers.

4.2 Sociocultural Motivations

4.2.1 Social Status and Identity Signaling

Thematic analysis of interview data (n = 60) identified “prestige orientation” as a core motivation: 78% of participants described code-switching as a marker of education and cosmopolitan identity. One student noted,

“Using English words in class shows I’m up to date with global trends.”

This aligns with the Markedness Model: English functions as the marked variety to index aspirational social roles.

4.2.2 Globalization and Modernity Factors

Participants frequently invoked globalization as a driver of switching. In social-media posts, “modernity” emerged as a recurrent theme across 64% of coded segments:

“Our startup is using the latest AI framework—مبسوطين بكل جديد.”

“Our startup is using the latest AI framework—we’re happy with all the new stuff.” —P37 (male, 28)

This reflects English’s association with technological progress and global networks.

4.2.3 Professional and Academic Needs

Among professionals (n = 20), “functional necessity” was emphasized: lack of transliterating Arabic terms in business and IT contexts compelled use of English. Survey data corroborated this: 91% agreed that code-switching improves communicative efficiency in their work fields. In academic contexts, 85% of student respondents reported switching when discussing specialized concepts.

4.3 Perceptions and Attitudes

4.3.1 Speakers' Views on Code-Switching

Survey responses ($n = 60$) indicated generally positive attitudes: mean endorsement of code-switching as “a valuable communication strategy” was 4.2 ($SD = 0.6$) on a 5-point scale. In interviews, participants described switching as “natural” and “unavoidable” in bilingual contexts.

4.3.2 Impact on Arabic Language and Culture

Despite positive views, 40% expressed concern about potential erosion of Arabic. Older participants (25–35) were significantly more likely to agree that “code-switching weakens my Arabic proficiency” ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 0.8$) than younger ones (18–24; $M = 2.9$, $SD = 0.7$; $t[58] = 4.56$, $p < .001$). This generational divide suggests that while youth embrace linguistic hybridity as cultural innovation, older cohorts perceive it as a threat to language maintenance.

4.3.3 Generational Differences in Attitudes:

Qualitative data revealed that younger speakers view “Arabizi” and code-switching as identity resources that bridge local and global cultures, whereas older speakers lament the loss of pure Arabic forms. One professional remarked:

“My generation worries that kids don’t know Fushā (pure Arabic) anymore. They text in English letters more than Arabic.”

This tension underscores the need for balanced language planning that accommodates bilingual practices while strengthening Arabic literacy and cultural heritage.

5. Discussion

The present study’s mixed-methods analysis of English–Arabic code-switching provides empirical evidence that aligns with, extends, and at times challenges existing literature on bilingual discourse in the Arab world.

5.1 Interpretation in Relation to Previous Studies

Consistent with Poplack’s (1980) typology, intra-sentential switching dominated our corpus, particularly among younger participants (60% vs. 50% for older groups; $p < .001$). This finding echoes Henderson’s (2013) observation of frequent embedded English phrases in Egyptian media. At the same time, our quantification of code-switching density across domains (45 switches/1,000 words in social media) corroborates Fahad’s (2018) survey of Saudi youth, who exhibited similar patterns in online communication (pp. 189–191). However, whereas Ammar and Spolsky (2006) reported that technical vocabulary gaps drove most college-level switching (pp. 52–54), our data reveal that pragmatic tag-switching (e.g., *you know*) plays an equally critical role in digital contexts, suggesting evolving functions of English markers beyond lexical necessity.

5.2 Linguistic and Cultural Consequences

Morphologically, the high rate of Arabic pluralization of English nouns (e.g., *فابلات*) underscores the resilience of Arabic word-formation processes even amid heavy borrowing. Phonological adaptation—particularly the replacement of /v/ and /p/—demonstrates that speakers maintain Arabic phonotactics while accommodating foreign segments. Yet, the preservation of English stress patterns in speech intimates a “double accent” phenomenon that may further hybridize urban registers. The integration of English

into everyday Arabic discourse signals a shift toward transnational change which is alarming for the morphological, syntactical and lexicological status of Arabic and its speakers as well.

5.3 Challenges to Arabic Language Preservation

Despite widespread acceptance—mean attitude score of 40% of participants expressed anxiety over potential language erosion, echoing Fahad's (2018) warning of declining Arabic proficiency (p.190). The generational divide, with older speakers more apprehensive, suggests that code-switching may accelerate domain loss for Fuṣḥā in informal and semi-formal settings. If left unaddressed, the normalization of English tags and syntactic frames could undermine curricula centered on Modern Standard Arabic, leading to competency gaps in reading and writing.

5.4 Identity Negotiation through Code-Switching

Our thematic analysis confirms Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model: English functions as a marked variety to index cosmopolitan identity and group solidarity (pp. 29–31). Younger participants described switching as a resource for “showing I’m up to date” and “connecting to a global audience”. This strategic alternation allows speakers to navigate multiple social identities within a single conversation.

5.5 Role of Education and Media in Spreading Code-Switching.

Formal education and media exposure emerged as dual engines driving code-switching. English-medium instruction in universities created an environment where academic discourse routinely mixes terminologies. Meanwhile, satellite television and social platforms disseminate code-mixed content to mass audiences, reinforcing hybrid registers. Our finding of high code-switching density in social media (45 per 1,000 words) suggests that digital communication may function as a “linguistic incubator,” accelerating normalization of bilingual forms beyond elite contexts.

5.6. Overall Summary of the Discussion

Overall, English-Arabic code-switching has evolved into a complex sociolinguistic phenomenon within Arab societies. On the one hand, it enhances communication by incorporating global famous terms, identity markers, and communicative ease; on the other, it poses a threat to the central role of formal Arabic.

By combining structural analysis with participants' attitudes, this study offers an in-depth understanding of bilingual expression in the Arab world.

Future research should examine the long-term effects of these trends and recommend educational and policy measures that promote balanced bilingual expression while ensuring the preservation of the Arabic language.

6. Research Findings

This study examined the patterns, functions, and socio-cultural foundations of English-Arabic code-switching among bilingual speakers in urban Arab settings.

Through a mixed-methods analysis, the following key findings emerged:

1. Intra-sentential code-switching (switching languages within a sentence) is the most dominant form, particularly in social media and academic circles.

2. English words are regularly adapted to Arabic morphological and phonological rules, such as:
 - Applying Arabic pluralization patterns
 - Phonetic modifications to align with Arabic pronunciation
3. The main motives behind code-switching include:
 - Expression of social status.
 - Connection to global modernity.
 - Practical necessity in professional and academic contexts.
4. Attitudinal analysis revealed that, generally, code-switching is perceived as a useful communicative tool. However, there are concerns among older generations about weakening Arabic language skills among youth.

The Dual Role of English Code-Switching

English code-switching in Arabic discourse plays a dual role:

Positive Aspects:

- Filling lexical gaps due to un-use of transliterated terms
- Conveying technical and global concepts.
- Constructing complex identities that bridge local and global current cultures

Negative Aspects:

- Threatening the rules of *Fusha* (Standard Arabic).
- Potentially weakening the position of Arabic in informal and semi-formal settings.
- Risking damage to Arabic literacy in formal writing genres if left unguided.

This duality highlights that code-switching should not be viewed solely through a positive or negative lens; rather, it should be understood as a complex process balancing linguistic innovation with the preservation of linguistic heritage.

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