

A Double-Edged Sword in the Arab World's Cultural and Linguistic Landscape: *Arabizi*

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Noor
halla 7abeebti nroo7 el m63m b3d
el event of before? 6:30 PM

Aldana
la2 ma2'9n bagdr elyoun 6:30 PM

Noor
laysh 3sa ma sharr is something
up? 6:31 PM

Aldana
la abdan lat7ateen el7mdellah ana
b5air bas t3bana a bit but ba7awl i
come 6:31 PM

To the average person reading this, the conversation above with numbers thrown in the middle of sentences may seem like nonsense. However, to fluent Arabizi speakers like myself, this is merely a glimpse of our typical conversations.

The conversation between my friends Noor and Aldana in our group chat is merely one example of how Arabizi is being used in our day-to-day conversations. Whether it's through text messages, emails, or other social media platforms, our reliance on this new form of communication is ever so prevalent. But what does that mean for us, our culture, and our language?

Before delving any further, I must explain what Arabizi is and what the numbers denote. Arabizi is a form of written Arabic that uses Latin letters and numbers to represent Arabic sounds that do not exist in English. For example, the number 3 represents the Arabic letter "ayn" (ع) and the number 6 represents the Arabic letter

"tah" (ط). This writing system is often used in text messages, emails, and other forms of digital communication among Arabic speakers, especially young people. The numbers used in Arabizi are as follows:

ء = 2
ع = 3
غ = 3'
ق = 8
ض = 9'
ص = 9
ط = 6
ظ = 6'

Arabizi has its roots in the Arabic chat rooms and online forums from the late 1990s and early 2000s. At the time, Arabic speakers communicated online primarily in Modern Standard Arabic, the formal version of the language. However, this posed a challenge as many people were more comfortable with their lo-

cal dialects, which differ significantly from Modern Standard Arabic.¹ Additionally, many Arabic speakers found it difficult to type in Arabic using the standard QWERTY (Latin-based alphabet) keyboard. In this context, Arabizi emerged as a popular alternative to Modern Standard Arabic in the digital space, with several advantages. One benefit of using Arabizi is that it facilitates communication among Arabic speakers by incorporating elements of various Arabic dialects, making it easier for speakers of different dialects to understand each other. It is also a faster and more convenient means of writing and sending messages, thanks to its use of abbreviations and numerals.

The mediating role of Arabizi is especially pronounced among Arab immigrants in the United States, whom some suspect first invented Arabizi such that they could text friends and families back home in more relatable dialects. For Arab Americans, Ara-

bizi serves not only as a language form but also as a means of asserting their hybrid identity that transcends the binary of “Arab” and “American.” It is a form of self-expression that is both familiar and relatable to their peers in both cultures. Therefore, Arabizi can act as a bridge between cultures, allowing Arab Americans to maintain their cultural roots while finding a way to communicate effectively with both communities. Young people in the Arab World, too, use Arabizi to assert their cultural identity as a generation that is both tech-savvy and multilingual – as well as a rising cultural force that challenges traditional norms and conventions. In particular, young Arab musicians and poets have incorporated Arabizi into their work to reflect their experien-

es and comment on contemporary society. For example, rather than choosing between English and Arabic, Lebanese poet Zeina Hashem uses Arabizi in her poems about exile and displacement, her language choice reflecting both her trilingual upbringing and her sense of feeling stranded between different cultures.²

Moreover, Arabizi has been a powerful tool for political expression in authoritarian countries. For example, during the Arab Spring, Arabizi played a significant role in mobilizing protesters on social media owing to its ability to connect activists speaking various dialects. In countries where the government heavily monitors online activities, Arabizi was an effective means of evading censorship and expressing

opinions that might otherwise have been silenced. By using Arabizi, individuals could communicate in a way that is not easily detected by authorities who are monitoring online channels for content that it deems inappropriate or subversive.

Despite its benefits, Arabizi has drawn considerable criticism from those concerned about traditional Arabic identity. This is because Arabizi is a simplified and informal form of Arabic that lacks the formal rules and grammar of standard Arabic. In classrooms, students used to speaking Arabizi may find it hard to transition back to formal Arabic, which is the preferred language in academic and professional settings. Arabizi also threatens to exclude older people who do not speak fluent English or use the internet

from the conversation. All these lead to the argument that Arabizi dilutes the Arab identity and undermines social cohesion.

Moreover, the normalization of Arabizi raises the uncomfortable question of whether Western cultural norms are displacing native ones. Take the adoption of Arabizi by Western expatriates in the Arab world. Because many expatriates in the region speak English as their first language, Arabizi allows them to communicate with Arabic speakers who might not be fluent in English. For example, in Gulf countries, Arabizi has become increasingly popular in recent years due to the rapid economic development and the influx of expatriates. As English became a necessity for career advancement and social mobility, Arabizi emerged as a

convenient tool for communication between Arabic speakers and expatriates. While Arabizi undeniably helps break down the linguistic and cultural barriers between locals and expatriates in the Arab world, the dominance of Western elites and their way of speaking in Gulf countries is criticized by some as a symptom of intellectual colonization. The unequal interaction between Arabic and English underscores the role of politics and globalization in shaping the linguistic landscape of the Arab World.³

With all the positives and negatives associated with Arabizi, one must take a balanced approach and view it with a grain of salt. While some argue that this novel method of communication will hinder the preservation of the Arabic language and Arab identi-

ty, others see it as a platform to accurately express themselves. Ultimately, the perception of Arabizi depends on the individual, and it is important to consider both the advantages and disadvantages associated with this language form. And while the conversation between Noor and Aldana may seem like nonsense to some, it is a language that reflects the complex and dynamic cultural landscape of the Arabic-speaking world. Ultimately, it is up to us to weigh its potential benefits and drawbacks while preserving our cultural heritage and promoting inclusivity and cultural exchange.

