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Digital Translanguaging and Arabic-English Transliteration (Arabizi): Insights from Syria and Lebanon

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ABSTRACT

In a globalised and technologically advancing world, an increasing number of people practice digital translanguaging. However, monoglossic ideological resistance to such practices remains, some of which can be conceptualised through the lens of moral panic. This research navigates one example of digital translanguaging, Arabic English Transliteration (AET), sometimes referred to as Arabizi. AET is the act of using English characters to write Arabic words. The current study employs a small-scale qualitative survey involving 26 Syrian and Lebanese youth with tertiary education experience. It addresses gaps in the AET literature by exploring attitudes and perceptions of AET use and examining the reasons that underlie its adoption. Analysis reveals a difference in the attitudes of Lebanese and Syrians, suggesting a need to move away from an exclusive focus on digital texts towards examining the socially-situated nature of their production and interpretation. An in-depth interview was then conducted with one participant who reported changes in her practice, from shunning AET to ample use of it, which corresponded with a study abroad learning experience. This interview provides nuanced evidence of the need to account for the educational, social and cultural contexts in the study of digital translanguaging. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and the potential connections between AET use and socio-cultural factors as well as a series of questions and directions for future research including the potential implications for English as a medium of instruction in education contexts.

KEYWORDS

Arabic-English transliteration, Arabizi, English as a medium of instruction, moral panic, translanguaging

Introduction

Over the past two decades, digital translanguaging practices have been rapidly expanding (García & Lin, 2017; Kim, 2018; Tagg & Asprey, 2017). Transliteration, an example of such practices, is the procedure of replacing a text written in one script or writing system with the characters of another system (Spilioti, 2019). This form of writing has gained popularity in digital communication among some Arabic speakers who choose to use English characters to write Arabic words (Khatteb Abu-Liel et al., 2020). Two main conditions catalysed the spread of Arabic English Transliteration (AET). First, some computers and phones did not support an Arabic keyboard (Warschauer et al., 2002). Second, using English characters to send phone text messages can be cheaper than using Arabic characters in some contexts (Crystal, 2001).[1] Although technological developments have addressed these conditions, AET continued to increase on a large scale. Nowadays, some people use AET despite having access to Arabic keyboards and irrespective of charging fees. For example,

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[1] In Syria, for example, 70 Arabic characters constitute a phone message while you can write up to 120 English characters for the same message.

they use English characters to write Arabic in instant messaging applications like WhatsApp (Al-bawardi, 2018), where charging fee differences do not apply.

Despite the plethora of publications referencing transliteration, there is a relative paucity of research on AET, particularly how AET use could be affected by the language of instruction in educational settings. After reviewing existing research (Abu Elhija, 2014; Alghamdi & Petraki, 2018; Al-Shaer, 2016; Haggan, 2007; Khatteb Abu-Liel et al., 2019; Palfreyman & Khalil, 2003; Sperrazza, 2014; Warschauer et al., 2002), we believe important gaps remain in the literature. Notably, there is a need for a more qualitative understanding of people's perceptions of AET use and a closer examination of the intersections between AET and the complex socio-cultural educational contexts in which it emerges. To address this lacuna in the literature, the current study is situated within the field of sociolinguistics. It primarily aims to expose the possible interplay of technological, educational, social, and other contextual factors in AET use in Syria and Lebanon. To this end, we explore people's attitudes and perceptions of this digital linguistic practice and unpack the reasons that underlie it. We include two categories of participants: people who do not use this variety of writing and people who make extensive use of it. It is hoped that this will allow us to capture a variety of attitudes and perceptions and enable us to identify the extent to which these might differ in accordance with their wider education and socio-cultural contexts, such as the potential impact of English as a medium of instruction (EMI). To achieve the purpose of this study, we seek to answer the following two research questions from Syrian and Lebanese participants.

1. How do people who do not use AET perceive this digital linguistic practice?
2. How do users of AET justify their use of it?

In the following, we first synthesise relevant literature on globalisation, socially-situated digital language practices in the educational context, digital translanguaging, and AET. Drawing from Thurlow (2006) and Tagg (2015), we also introduce the concept of moral panic to assist our analysis in exploring the strong perceptions for and against this practice in educational settings. Then, we present the research design, methods, participants, ethical considerations, and data analysis. Following that, we detail the specific contexts relevant to our study. Finally, we discuss the findings and explore directions for future research on AET within the fields of education and sociolinguistics.

Literature review

The literature review is divided into three sections. First, we discuss globalisation and its connection to socially situated digital language practices. Second, we explore digital translanguaging and illuminate some of the opposition to this practice by introducing the concept of moral panic. Lastly, we discuss AET to situate our study within the existing literature and identify the gaps we seek to address.

Globalised and socially situated digital language practices

The widespread use of English in digital language practices has been thoroughly discussed (Barton & Lee, 2013; Phillipson, 2012). This spread can be attributed to the history of internet technology that was designed by North American and British engineers (Bokor, 2018; Spilioti, 2014; Tagg, 2015). Other reasons can be related to the increasing economic and political power of the people who speak the language (Crystal, 2011; 2017) as a result of globalisation (Blommaert, 2010). One of the consequences of globalisation is the production of hybrid cultures where a mix of the global and the local creates new social and cultural practices (Kimura & Canagarajah, 2018). Glocalisation, a concept popularised by Robertson (1995), captures this phenomenon by noting the simultaneous forces of heterogeneity and homogeneity within globalisation. In doing so, he explores the tensions and complexity of globalisation's universalisation of the particular and the particularisation of the universal (Robertson, 2012). Robertson believes that perceiving globalisation as a homogenising force obliterating locality is misleading. This is because local cultures and individual preferences have the ability to neutralise the power of globalisation in general, and as is most relevant to this article, in its impact on digital linguistic practice in particular (Saxena & Omoniyi, 2010).

Glocalisation points towards the importance of understanding the complex relationship between technology and language as socially situated. Online relationships have offline influences (Herring, 2004), and decisions about orthography can constitute social and political statements (Hillewaert, 2015). Androutsopoulos (2006) argued that by over-focusing on medium-specific features of the language, studies failed to consider the sociolinguistic dimension. In other words, it is not sensible to neglect that digital practices are socially situated or conceal the interplay of technological, educational, and social contextual factors. A shift of focus can be traced in recent studies from medium-related technological deterministic approaches to user-related and socially situated patterns of understanding language use (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti, 2016; Herring et al., 2016; Virtanen, 2013). Further, Koutsogiannis and Mitsikopoulou (2007) highlight that online cross-cultural and cross-linguistic practices expose a contradiction that happens in some societies between global networks and local identities and how people find solutions to these contradictions. Thus, although global English is an evident reality in many digital linguistic practices, particularly in educational contexts, it is difficult to determine the impact of its linguistic character precisely because of the many hybrid trends that have emerged from it.

Digital translanguaging and moral panic

Recently, translanguaging has been widely accepted as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of language hybridisations, including translation, code-switching, code-mixing, orthographic morphing, and transliteration (Baynham & Lee, 2019; García & Lin, 2017; Zhu, 2020). Translanguaging refers to language practices where multilinguals use different linguistic resources drawn from their full linguistic repertoire to make meaning (Li, 2018). The advent of the internet has opened up a digital space in which translanguaging practices are growing. Examples include combining informal and formal writing styles (Baron, 2010) and using abbreviations and numbers that phonetically assimilate the letters to re-spelling some words (Merchant, 2001; 2005). However, these practices have been described by some as "the linguistic ruin of [the] generation" (Axtman, 2002, p. 1), a kind of "linguistic whatever-ism" (Baron, 200, p. 5) or even a "bastardization" of language (O'Conner, 2005, p. 2). Similarly, digital communication practices more generally have also been subject to harsh scrutiny (Thurlow, 2003). Thurlow's (2006) metadiscursive analysis of print-media descriptions of digital communication found the practices described as "reprehensible, frightening, depraved, infamous, criminal, jarring and abrasive, apocalyptic, execrable, pointless, and aberrant" (p. 677). Thurlow argues the nexus of youth, language, and technology are consistently perceived in an overly reductionist and sensationalist manner and are "scapegoated for a range of adult anxieties" (p. 689). The most pervasive theme across the corpus studied by Thurlow (2006) was described as "an overriding sense of moral panic" (p. 678).

When combining digital communication and translanguaging practices into digital translanguaging, it is unsurprising that strong resistance rooted in monoglossic ideology emerges. This is because translanguaging practices promote the transgression of socially-constructed linguistic boundaries, in contrast to monoglossic ideology, which views languages as separate, bounded entities (García, 2009). A monoglossic lens is associated with ‘one nation-one language’ ideology which views that a particular language belongs to a particular nation and that this language defines national unity and national identities (Fuller & Leeman, 2020). As a consequence, people are expected to speak the national language of the polity they live in while naturalising the exclusion of other languages. In this case, the use of other languages alongside the national language creates a moral panic, fearing that the purity of the national language will be contaminated (House, 2014). Such ideas can be particularly potent in educational contexts where languages are taught, and rules govern their usage.

We take Thurlow’s (2006) invocation of ‘moral panic’ as a helpful way to explore this backlash and unpack its potential socially situated nuances. The concept of moral panic has been explored by a plethora of scholars. Wright (2015) noted over 5,000 academic articles citing Cohen’s (1972) influential and foundational text on the topic. People are said to experience a moral panic when they express fear of something abstract with reactions against a more specific and concrete thing (Tagg, 2015). However, moral panics are not simply individualised fears. They are social phenomena facilitated and circulated through contextualised social discourses and norms. It is suggested that digital linguistic practices offer a good example where the specific case represents wider social issues (Cohen, 1973 cited in Tagg, 2015). In this sense, one may experience a moral panic when they fear that the existence of the national language in their ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1991) along with their national identities are threatened by the introduction of English or other languages. Thus, critiques of specific digital linguistic practices can represent or be connected to a wider fear of the possible negative impact of an interconnecting world that might threaten some other localised social and cultural practices.

Falkof (2020) has identified a litany of critiques of the moral panic concept stemming from both overly restrictive and templated uses and excessively flexible and ambiguous applications. However, we agree with Falkof’s concluding cautious optimism for the concept's continued relevance and value when applied in an intentional and conceptually grounded manner. Thus, we believe that by situating it in the wider discussion of monoglossic ideology, the concept of moral panic can be helpful here in providing a flexible and analytically generative sensitising concept (Bowen, 2006) to aid our qualitative understanding of socially situated perceptions of digital translanguaging practices. Bowen (2006) argues sensitising concepts can provide an interpretive frame to help direct attention towards, and make meaning of, social phenomena being investigated. Thus, we have incorporated the concept of moral panic in this study’s qualitative analysis of the digital translanguaging practice under examination here, AET.

Arabic English transliteration (AET)

Digital translanguaging escalates to a new level with transliteration. Users of AET replace Arabic letters with English characters and create a new orthography. This new orthography is referred to by some scholars as Arabizi; a term that combines the two Arabic words – Arabi meaning ‘Arabic’ and Englezi meaning ‘English’.

Previous studies have contributed to unpacking and understanding AET. For example, Warschauer et al. (2002) and Haggan (2007) explored AET in the two contexts of Egypt and Kuwait, respectively. Both studies highlighted how numerals (e.g. 2, 3, and 7) were used to represent Arabic sounds with no equivalent English letters. Palfreyman and al Khalil (2003; 2007) explored AET in the United Arab Emirates. They investigated the consistency of the representation of Arabic sounds and what influences shaped the choice of spellings. They found that using English letters to represent Arabic sounds is moderately consistent and differs according to the local dialect among the users. Similarly, Abu Elhija (2014) examined the differences and standardisations occurring in this digital writing system amongst different users in different countries. Focusing on the context of Palestine, Al-Shaer (2016) examined the effects of AET on students' performance in Arabic fluency and spelling. They found a correlation between the usage of AET and weaker scores in the spelling test and concluded that AET seems to negatively affect the Arabic language capabilities of students. More recently, Khatteb Abu-Liel et al. (2019) conducted a large-scale corpus-based analysis and explored the consistency of the orthography and its properties as a system. They reported finding high stability in the use of orthographic conventions and only marginal variability. They interpreted this as an indication of "how quickly bottom-up orthography can become stable" (Khatteb Abu-Liel et al., 2019, p. 235).

Furthermore, employing a socio-linguistic lens, Alghamdi and Petraki (2018) investigated the reasons behind the use of AET by young Saudi Arabians and their attitudes towards its use. They found that the use of AET by Saudi youth was strongly linked to the need for creating an online identity and as a marker of group solidarity. Participants in this study reported using AET as a "secret code" and mainly because it is the "language of their peers" (p. 13). No deeper investigation or analysis was offered of the possible interconnection between some socio-cultural aspects, such as the influence of education contexts, and what made this digital variety of writing 'the language of peers' in the first place. Another interesting study that moved away from offering solely a linguistic analysis of the phenomenon was conducted by Sperrazza (2014) who employed a political lens and shed light on how Arabizi youths were the ones who instigated the 2011 Egyptian revolution in the digital space. Sperrazza argued that these youths have proved to be "more than just a linguistic hybrid", or a "virtual reinvention of the self" but "part of one voice fighting for the creation of one Egypt" (p. 38). She contended that while the western behaviour, linguistic choices, and digitally constructed identities of these youths separated them from the rest of society, their national consciousness helped to redefine what it means to be Egyptian. Their political involvement becomes a more meaningful indicator of 'Egyptian-ness' than their linguistic choices or behaviour.

Most of the studies reviewed above are primarily quantitative, focusing on the linguistic aspects of AET without probing into the factors that constitute this writing system. While quantitative studies provide valuable insights, they might lack the depth of insights that can be gained from qualitative data. Also, although a limited number of studies approached the phenomenon from an educational or sociolinguistic lens, no research has yet provided a close examination or deep insights into the intersection between this digital linguistic practice and the wider socio-cultural contexts in which it emerges. The disproportionate focus on youth without discussing the impact of education contexts and AET usage is particularly noticeable. Further, none of the available research on AET explored the phenomenon in the Syrian or Lebanese contexts, and no studies have attempted to assess whether people's attitudes might differ according to their linguistic environment. These gaps in the literature offer an exciting opportunity to approach AET from a sociolinguistic perspective and to involve participants from two different contexts in clarifying their attitudes toward this practice and the factors that propel them to either use or not use it.

In summary, the literature reviewed here synthesises the contested terrain of translanguaging practices. We have noted the glocalising forces within globalisation and the importance of social situatedness to illuminate the complexity of translanguaging in an increasingly digital and interconnected world. To assist our analysis, we have highlighted the concept of moral panic to explore resistance to translanguaging in specific contexts. This study looks at AET as an example of translanguaging and seeks to use the concepts discussed above to better understand the utilisation and resistance to the practice. In doing so, we believe this article addresses important gaps in the AET literature and raises important insights and questions relevant to sociolinguistics and education.

Research design and methods

This exploratory research employs a qualitative survey method that included a combination of 20 closed and open-ended questions. Though a survey is sometimes viewed as more than a method but less than a design frame (Thomas, 2013), it is acknowledged as a defensible research design in social studies (Denscombe, 2014). A survey can be used with a variety of collection methods to measure some aspects of a social phenomenon (Denscombe, 2014). AET is an online linguistic practice that we seek to investigate as inextricably interwoven with the wider social, cultural, and educational context. Therefore, it can be considered as an aspect of a social phenomenon, and employing a survey as a research design to investigate it is suitable as it can help both "to contextualize and to interrogate the findings of the primary analysis" (Hinrichs, 2016, p. 30).

While traditionally employed in larger-scale quantitative studies, surveys are also a legitimate and valuable means to gather smaller-scale qualitative data (Braun et al., 2020). Braun and colleagues argue that surveys can "harness the potential qualitative data offer for nuance, in-depth and sometimes new understandings of social issues" (p. 1). Further, online qualitative surveys offer a more "participant-centred research practice" by engaging in research that is less obtrusive, less burdensome, and more flexible (p. 6). These factors were critical in our decision to employ an online survey, including open-ended qualitative questions, instead of other qualitative research methods. Participants in our survey are from complex, contested, and sometimes active conflict contexts in the Middle East. As a result, issues of accessibility were challenging at times, and the importance of a participant-centred design and ethics were paramount. The qualitative informed survey approach seeks to balance these concerns with our desire for deeper explorations of the participants' thoughts and perspectives.

The starting point for this survey was the social networking site Facebook where we explained the purpose of our research and extended a request seeking two groups of volunteering participants willing to share their views on the topic. According to Denscombe (2014), social websites like Facebook offer an effective way of spreading the word about a topic of interest. Facebook users were asked to leave a comment telling us of their position with regard to the issue – whether they use this variety of writing or not. Two surveys were then developed; one for participants who do not use AET and another for those who use it. Each of the two surveys included two main sets of questions. Following Braun et al. (2020), both surveys were designed to gather demographic information (e.g. nationality, country of residence, age, gender, level of education) and topic-based information with room for open-ended comments and reflection. The survey that targeted users of AET focused on eliciting their reasons for using it. The questionnaire that targeted people who do not use it focused more closely on unpacking and understanding their opposition to this variety of writing. Participants were then contacted via email and provided with the relevant survey.

After receiving the questionnaire data with a response rate of 86.6% (30 original participants with 26 returned), one participant was chosen for a follow-up interview. Follow-up data collection in surveys with qualitative questions allows for further explorations of unanticipated or generative initial findings (Braun et al., 2020). This second sample was thus purposive. The inclusion criterion was identified as: a person who used to be intolerant of this practice but changed their perspective afterwards. This secondary sample allowed us to better understand the interplay between our two research questions and groups of participants (those who do and those who do not use AET) and to explore the factors influencing how and why people might change their practice. Only one of the participants met this criterion; a Syrian student pursuing an MA in the USA at the time of the study. She was chosen because after the initial analysis of the questionnaire, we found that she used to be intolerant of this practice, but her views changed and she started using it after living with a Lebanese flatmate at university. The semi-structured interview combined a list of predetermined relevant questions to cover while remaining open for any question or topic to be freely followed up on as much as necessary.

Moreover, this participant voluntarily and proactively provided us with two authentic “synchronous” (Herring, 2001, p. 614) samples of her computer-mediated communication with her Lebanese friend. The value of these samples lies in providing the study with a naturalistic and unobtrusive measure (Jensen, 2013). While we did not plan for or actively solicit this information, we found the exchanges to be revealing and informative for the project. We thus included it as additional, unanticipated follow-up data.

The emerging sample in this study is a convenience one, and the sample size (n=26 completed surveys) falls within what Braun et al. (2020) classify as the lower end (20-49) of the qualitative surveying spectrum. Despite this, as Braun et al. (2020) affirm, these small-scale qualitative surveys still “have the capacity to deliver rich, deep and complex data” (p. 4), and a convenience sample can generate reliable and valid insights into a social event or setting (Jenson, 2013). It is important to note that findings of this study are neither generalisable nor representative of all users of AET. The true value of findings lies in providing insights and interpretations that can be reflected on by those in education and other relevant social sciences in light of other research and further probed into in future studies. Moreover, it is important to discuss and acknowledge the researchers’ positionality that affected the “hypothetical population” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 238) that corresponded to our first convenience sample. The Facebook post was published on the Facebook account of the lead researcher, who is a Syrian doctoral student and mostly has Syrian and Lebanese Facebook friends with tertiary education degrees. As a result, 18 Syrians (12 females and 6 males) and 8 Lebanese (5 females and 3 males) comprised the 26 participants. Participants were 24-40 years old, and they all held either a Bachelor’s or a Master’s degree.

Ethical considerations

The purpose of the study, the nature of the research, potential benefits and confidentiality information were all fully disclosed to participants. For anonymity purposes, numbers will be used to refer to participants who filled out the questionnaires. Sarah and Dima are pseudonyms used to refer to the girl who has been interviewed and her friend. Participants made an active choice to participate, and we ensured they were aware of their right to withdraw and that in case of their withdrawal, existing data would be destroyed and no further analysis would take place. Data collected was stored securely and then deleted upon the completion of the study.

Data analysis

Analysis of the questionnaires and interview data was primarily inductive. A constant comparative method (Thomas, 2013) was followed to identify codes and analyse the content. Transcribed data were examined iteratively, making comparisons of each part, such as phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, with all other parts (Thomas, 2013). Identified codes were then used to capture themes and categories. Emergent themes were finally discussed. It is worth noting that the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview captured the interconnections between the interview data and the data inferred from the computer-mediated communication samples the interviewed participant provided. In this way, the computer-mediated communication samples were highly useful in validating themes elicited from the semi-structured interview data.

Contexts

As all participants in this research were either Syrian or Lebanese, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of linguistic practices and educational contexts in both countries. Syria and Lebanon are both Middle Eastern countries that have Arabic as their first language. However, both have undergone a slightly different trajectory in terms of their language policies, particularly regarding the relationship between Arabic and foreign languages.

Lebanon has long been known for its multilingual profile, in which people often mix Arabic and other languages in their communication (Bacha & Bahous, 2011). This multilingual society was developed due to the European colonisation in which French missionaries introduced foreign languages through schools and other forms of educational institutions (Bahous et al., 2011). Since then, most Lebanese, particularly those of higher socio-economic levels, view Arabic monolingualism negatively and associate English and French languages with prestige, progress and modernisation (Zakharia, 2009). The Lebanese government issued the 1997 Educational Policy which stipulated that Lebanese have to be taught to become at least trilingual since primary years. Some studies found that code-switching has become the norm, particularly in educational institutions where students and teachers communicate by mixing Arabic and English (Bahous et al., 2013). Additionally, most Lebanese universities use either English or French as the medium of instruction (Farah, 2005).

Unlike Lebanon, the influence of English has not been as strong in Syria since it declared its independence in 1946 (Farah, 2005). Arabic remains the only official language in Syria. In fact, one of the oldest Arabic Language Academies exists in Damascus. Established in 1918, it was first mainly concerned with Arabisation after the cessation of Ottoman rule and while under French colonisation (Arab Academy, 2011). Professors and scholars worked hard and indeed succeeded in restoring the use of Arabic in the country's educational institutions. It is also well-known that this academy has a significant role in affecting decisions related to using other languages at schools and universities (Baath Party, 2011).

As for higher education, the Syrian context is monolingual. Arabic is the language of textbooks, the medium of instruction and assessment. English is perceived as a foreign language and is only delivered via four separate General English (GE) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) modules over the first two years of undergraduate study. Only recently, some attempts at introducing dual medium education resulted in limited English-medium instruction in some scientific faculties where only one core module is chosen to be delivered and assessed in English starting from the third year onwards (Hajir, 2016). This is not to suggest that policymakers in Syria are not aware of the importance of English in an increasingly globalised world. Indeed, the 2002 Education Reform marks the first attempt to teach English in the first grade in primary schools. This section has shown that Lebanon and Syria have different social and cultural norms surrounding language and that such differences were particularly evident within their two educational systems. With this context in mind, we now turn to the data.

Findings

Scrutinising the data, it was noticeable that participants who reported not using AET were all Syrians (n=17). On the other hand, participants who used this variety of writing were all Lebanese (n=8). One additional Syrian participant identified as currently using AET even though she had previously disliked the practice. With this finding emerging after collecting the questionnaire data, we explored it more deeply in an interview with the Syrian girl who had a distinct, previously negative and currently positive, perspective in our data set. In the following, we first present the general attitude of participants who do not use AET. Then, AET users' justifications for using it are discussed. In both cases, numbers are used in place of the participants' names. After that, one more finding elicited from the follow-up interview and the accompanying computer-mediated communication samples is introduced.

Findings from people who do not use AET

In general, a trend of refusal, annoyance, and dissatisfaction with AET was expressed by those who oppose its use. These participants appear to perceive AET as a neither needed nor justifiable stigmatised use of language. Also, ideas of the difficulty of understanding this form of writing that has no consistent system were presented. Many negative terms were used to describe users of AET, who are seen as striking a blow at the purity of Arabic language:

> Participant 4: "It takes me more time to get the point of the message."
> Participant 7: "It has no common rules."
> Participant 3: "They are jeopardising the originality and purity of Arabic."
> Participant 6: "We need to defend our language."
> Participant 8: "I fear even to imagine the situation in 10 or 15 years."

Arguments go on:

> Participant 14: "Our language is our identity. If they accept to change their language, they will accept to change all their social and cultural practices."
> Participant 4: "I cannot excuse them. I see them as naïve."
> Participant 2: "I see those people as ashamed of their language or their culture."
> Participant 12: "They use it just to say 'I am cool."

The comments above resonate with Thurlow (2006) and Tagg's (2015) idea of moral panic. This is reflected in the way participants express their anxieties towards the spread of such digital translanguaging practices that will "jeopardise" the "purity" of their "language", "identity", "society" and "culture". AET seems to be viewed by participants as a possible catalyst for wider and serious social and cultural issues rather than a corollary of a wider issue. Undergirding this wider moral panic appears to be an implicit monoglossic position (García, 2009) advancing a one nation-one language ideology (Fuller & Leeman, 2020). As is quoted by Participant 6 above, "We need to defend our language." Importantly, "language" is singular and "our" is a collective and bounded identity held together in part by the singular language itself.

Findings from people who use AET

Analysis of data yielded two main reasons for using AET: efficiency and globalisation.

Efficiency

All participants who used this variety of writing highlighted that it was more efficient to use AET than to write Arabic using Arabic characters. They explained that they were faster at typing English than typing Arabic.

> Participant 21: "I can type in English so fast, without needing to look at the keyboard and without making mistakes."
> Participant 19: "I do not like typing in Arabic as I am only moderately fast and sometimes make mistakes."

While this might sound like a reasonable justification, it raises an important question of why they were not as fast typing in their first language. This takes us to the second main reason.

Globalisation impact: Work and education
Participants discussed the impact of globalisation on their linguistic choices. They talked about the wide prevalence of English in multiple aspects of their daily life, especially in university and work settings. They also elaborated on how they resisted this impact and resorted to AET as a means to cling to their Arabic language. In other words, despite being practically able to communicate solely in English, they chose not to compromise the intimacy and the expressive power of Arabic.

> Participant 20: "Most of my communications at work are in English."
> Participant 25: "Some might blame me for saying that I am faster in English, but this is a natural result of typing in English for the last 13 years. All my study and job requirements are in English."
> Participant 19: "Most of my friends are well-versed in English, but we still do not like to communicate solely in English. We appreciate Arabic, and we prefer to use Arabic words to better express ourselves."
> Participant 23: "All my work communications are in English. Continuous switching between English and Arabic keyboard is not practical, especially when I have more than one conversation at the same time. It is more user-friendly to keep the English keyboard on and use it with everyone."

The participants' input speaks forcibly to Robertson's (1995) glocalisation. The impact of globalisation is undeniable, but it is not exterminating locality. Participants adhere to using Arabic but do also embrace translanguaging practices and choose to use AET for efficacy and as a result of living in a context swayed by the spell of globalisation. One important aspect of globalisation that was discussed as triggering AET was using English as a medium of instruction at universities. Some participants believe that this hugely impacted their linguistic practices, particularly because they spent all their years of university studies writing assignments, working on projects and taking exams in English.

> Participant 19: "My undergraduate and graduate studies were entirely in English, and I think I was greatly affected by this."
> Participant 25: "I do believe that the language of my education could have triggered this as it made me more comfortable with English."

The statements above dialectically neutralise the impact of technology on language use and enhance Androutsopoulos's (2006) argument regarding the vital impact of education contextual factors. The impact of the language of instruction on students' choices of whether to use or not use AET contribute to debates around how education policies that mandate EMI might create linguistic, epistemic and cultural tensions in host communities (Macaro et al., 2018; Phan & Barnawi, 2015; Piller & Cho, 2013). As expressed by Wee (2021), the fast-developing tendency to employ EMI requires a more in-depth questioning of the complex and, at times, controversial relationships between language, education, culture, politics and the economy. Therefore, while closely connected with internationalisation processes, education policy debates around EMI should not "omit the questions of coloniality and imperialism" (Chaung and Kester, 2022, p. 440). Cutting-edge theoretical engagements with epistemic justice and the decolonial turn in education research have been rapidly expanding (see Cremin et al., 2021; Hajir, 2020; Hajir and Kester, 2021; Hajir et al., 2021). However, approaching education policies on EMI and their impact on AET from an educational decolonial lens remains under-researched. While we remain attentive to the limitations of monolingual ideologies, the findings of this study raise an important question: In what ways do EMI education policies reinforce power asymmetries between languages and in knowledge production more broadly?

To further illustrate the impact of contextual factors and how language users may reproduce or resist them, we interviewed Sarah, a Syrian student studying in the USA at the time of our research. We sought to explore reasons beyond her changing attitude and behaviour. Sarah used to reject AET but then started using it herself at a time corresponding to a change in her educational and social context.

Interview findings

As previously discussed, Syria is more resistant to globalisation than Lebanon, and is adopting monoglossic ideology as a result. Interview data further enhanced this point. For example, the language used at universities in Syria is strictly Arabic unless students are specialising in English literature. Contrary to most Lebanese people, Syrians are not known for switching between English and Arabic in their daily speaking. Sarah explained:

> Lebanese people are known for mixing even three languages [Arabic, English, and French]. Switching languages rarely happens in Syria, not because Syrians are not good at English. Even people who are specialised in English don't do that because in Syria, you either speak everything in English, if the context requires this, or speak everything in Arabic. Continuous switching is perceived as pointless. I used not to tolerate it or understand why Lebanese people do that. I watch their TV programmes and always thought they are mfazlakeen2 and they do this to come across as more educated.

Sarah, however, later changed her perspective.

> When I first arrived in the USA and lived with Dima, I discovered that she switches languages like all Lebaneses. At first, I thought she was being pretentious because we were new friends. Later, I found it was not the case, especially when I once overheard her talking to her mom on the phone and switching languages.

The following data and analysis explain how this code-switching relates to AET.

Imitation of daily speaking

Sarah believes that AET is a direct result of Lebanese people's daily language switching–which, as our literature review has shown, is deeply connected to the differing social context and educational policies in that country. Like all people, they want to chat in text the way they speak. She felt that

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2 Mfazlakeen is the plural form of mfazlak. It is a colloquial Arabic word that is usually used to describe someone who says/ does something meaningless just for the sake of saying it, with no clear purpose other than trying to look/ sound knowledgeable.

continuous switching of keyboards was not possible. She elaborated on her options and how she chose to use AET. Sarah said:

> After about 7 months, I, myself, started mixing the two languages when speaking. In instant messaging, we usually write similar to how we speak. I had four options:
> One; to write everything in Arabic (I will then write the English words in Arabic which will look so weird)
> Two; to write everything in English (I will be pretentious because I usually do not speak with Dima only in English).
> Three; to write Arabic words in Arabic and English words in English (continuous keyboard switching is inefficient)
> Four; to use AET (which I finally chose.)

Interestingly, Sarah also provided us with two computer-mediated communication samples of her communication with Dima. Sample 1 (See appendix 1 for a translation of the two samples) shows how she used to respond to Dima only in English when she first knew her. This was for two main reasons. First, she did not want Dima to think that she was not comfortable communicating in English; some Lebanese have this impression of Syrians. Second, she did not want to use AET because she did not like it.3

> Sarah: Dima, Jenny sent us an email asking for our bank details. I sent her mine. Have u sent her yours yet?
> Dima: 1a2 sara7a. Bahkeki after class
> Dima: Eh Sarah. Ba3atela email la Jenny. All sorted.
> Leki. I'm eating out with Mona. Would you like to join us?
> Sarah: Sorry, can't make it. There is a drop in session to know more about PhD opportunities and I'm really interested, can't miss it.
> Dima: 1k ma 21tili before u selfish :P hahaha I'm also interested.
> Sarah: I swear my friend has just told me haha I didn't even know that today is an open day in my department. A lot of activities are taking place! You can still show up.

Having a look at this previous sample shows that while Dima writes the way she speaks on a daily basis mixing Arabic and English, Sarah writes in English only. Sample 2 shows that after spending a year studying in the USA and having become a good friend of Dima, Sarah started switching languages herself when speaking. She then found AET a more efficient alternative.4

> Sarah: Hey, Dima, keef serti el youm?
> Dima: Mashi el 7al.. Pain killers help
> Sarah: salamtik. r u going shopping with me or not?
> Dima: ana ma7'arj raw7a abadan. can we do that tomorrow?
> Sarah: Don't worry, akid menajela.

Sarah's argument epitomises Herring's (2004, p. 770) "tendency towards orality". A shift toward speech-like forms contributed to Sarah's final decision to use AET. The interplay of technological,

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[3] The first sample is dated October 15, 2018. Sarah and Dima were new friends. They had arrived in the USA a month before this conversation.

[4] This second sample is dated September 2, 2019. Sarah and Dima have been friends and living in the US for about a year.

social, and contextual factors is clearly delineated by Sarah, and the importance of her English language study abroad context should also not be understated. As Quan (2021) notes, study abroad contexts can promote transformative translanguaging spaces and practices. This point adds further, albeit complicating, emphasis on the role of educational contexts in shaping language use. Intriguing here is also the undeniable dominance of English that led Sarah, and indeed most other participants who use AET, to perceive the other option of writing English in Arabic as funny and weird while comfortably accepting the other option of writing Arabic in English. This finding contributes to debates on education policies and EMI in higher education. Vora (2018) and Koch and Vora (2019) argue that the best lens to analyse the impact of EMI is to focus on the ‘encounter’ between the different languages. The encounter, they contend, helps us concentrate on the processes multiple actors engage with to produce meaning. The value of this argument lies in avoiding approaching languages through a mono-lingual ideology lens, in favour of a more non-essentialist and dynamic approach. While we agree with the essence of this argument, the finding above raises an important question: What do we do when the encounter between different languages in educational settings is asymmetrical and when one language seems to be contributing to erasing the orthography of another?

Discussion and conclusion

This study addresses gaps in the AET literature by highlighting qualitative insights from Syrian and Lebanese perspectives and paying close attention to how participants take up, reproduce, or resist monoglossic ideologies in their socio-cultural contexts and how this affects their choice of using or not using digital translanguaging practice. In this study, we paid particular attention to the role of educational contexts and policies in shaping such practices. Herring (2004) and Androutsopoulos (2008) called for examining the sociolinguistic dimension that underlies some digital practices. Building on their work, we set out to answer two main questions related to the attitudes and perceptions of people who do not use AET and the justifications for those who do. Findings suggest that this phenomenon can be described in contextually and culturally meaningful terms, especially after finding that Syrian participants in this small-scale study expressed opposition to this translanguaging practice. In contrast, Lebanese participants reported more tolerance of it. Although AET started prevailing among some Syrians, Syrian participants in this study nearly unanimously expressed their dissatisfaction with the practice. Moreover, a moral panic of further deviant social and cultural practices mirroring monoglossic ideology can be identified in their responses. In this study, the concept of moral panic helps us understand how aversion to AET appears to not just be a superficial critique or preference for the alternative but rather a socio-culturally rooted opposition connected to the perception of threats to the national language in one's community. Such resistances may stem from cultural and structural factors in education such as the language of instruction and language norms in schooling contexts. Further, changes in education contexts, such as study abroad, may contribute to noticeable changes in digital translanguaging use.

Regarding reasons in favour of AET, Lebanese participants justified their use with claims of “seeking efficiency”. Findings also speak forcibly to Robertson's (1995) glocalisation. Participants choose to use AET instead of communicating solely in English because they do not want to compromise the intimacy and expressive power of Arabic. Reference was made to globalisation and the possible impact of the language of instruction at universities on their linguistic practices. Again, this data points towards the potentially meaningful connection between education policy and norms and socially situated practices like AET. Furthermore, the impact of the Lebanese Arabic-English code-switching in their daily speaking was found to play a role. This point further espouses Herring’s (2004, p. 770) argument about how “tendency towards orality” affects some written digital practices. By investigating the two different social contexts and their impact on people's practices and views, this study accounts for the "variety of group practices" mentioned in Crystal (2011, p. 155), which was later critiqued by Androutsopoulos (2006, p. 420) as "customarily noted, but not accounted for in any systematic way".

This data, while not generalisable, points us towards the importance of considering some forms of moral panic, like the one revealed in this study, as possibly the result of wider social and cultural phenomena rather than a mere cause for further abstract fears. This study magnifies how AET is a linguistic phenomenon connected to human actions and decisions, such as choosing to use EMI at universities. Our findings point towards how actions and decisions, when reified through local, regional, and global educational processes, have the potential to both constrain and enable the digital linguistic choices of young people. Further, these linguistic choices can change from what they are now precisely because they are the result of human practices and decisions in changing contexts. In essence, this study calls for a more nuanced socio-cultural understanding of digital manifestations of translanguaging instead of reductionist arguments around technological determinism and homogenising globalisation. In our study, such arguments failed to capture the complex interplay between some digital practices and the wider social, cultural, and educational contexts.

While most critiques of education policies around EMI call for resisting Western hegemony and protecting local culture, identity, and tradition, it is not our intention in this study to present an argument in favour of or against EMI. Influenced by Wee (2021) and Reynold (2021), who encourage academic interventions in such debates to problematise simple dichotomies and totalising narratives, we acknowledge the limitations and possibilities, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of EMI. English proficiency as a result of EMI education policies can indeed be a double-edged sword. English presents Southern populations with access to broader knowledge, a global workforce, and opportunities for international collaboration, exchange, and study abroad. This is undoubtedly desirable especially given the global nature of the challenges we face today. However, when EMI contributes to linguistic tensions such as AET, where an orthography of one language is being increasingly compromised, new questions and opportunities for further research with new theoretical lenses arise: In what ways do EMI education policies reinforce power asymmetries between languages and knowledge production more broadly? And, how can we critically engage in AET and EMI in a way that remains attentive to the risks of asymmetrical encounters between English and other languages? We encourage future researchers to take up these questions and draw theoretical insights from critical decolonial discourses when considering education policy around language and its impact on students' digital translanguaging practices.

Further research could expand on the findings in additional ways as well. Our relatively small sample size and use of qualitative questions through a survey leave room for both deeper qualitative explorations and broader quantitative understandings. An ethnographic element might be developed following Susan Herring's (2004) computer-mediated discourse analysis or Jannis Androutsopoulos' (2008) discourse-centred online ethnography. The sample could also be extended to explore the interaction between situated digital practices and gender, age or a variety of different educational backgrounds. Lastly, a deeper exploration of the technological factors at play warrants further research. What, if any, technological factors shape the perception and use of AET? How do evolving technological platforms and modalities impact AET itself and users' engagement with it in classrooms and societies at large?

While findings from this study are generative for thinking about AET as a translanguaging practice, there are important limitations to note. Given the small scale of this qualitative survey design, we acknowledge that our findings are neither generalisable nor representative of the wider population. Further, participants in this study were all in the same age range and possess similar educational qualifications. Thus, they are not representative of a considerable proportion of people. As we noted above, future research could expand on our work here to consider larger and more representative sample sizes.

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Appendix 1

Translation of the two samples from Sarah

Sample 1

Sarah: Dima, Ita sent us an email asking for our banking details! I sent her mine. Haven't you sent her yours yet?

Dima: Honestly, not yet. Look I'll talk to you after my class

Dima: yeah Sarah, I sent an email to Ita, I'm fine now

Look, I want to eat out with Mona, would you like to join us?

Sarah: Sorry, can't make it. There is a drop in session to know more about PH.D. opportunities and I'm really interested, so won't miss this chance.

Dima: You haven't told me before you selfish :P hahaha I'm also interested.

Sarah: I swear my friend has just told me haha I didn’t even know that today is an open day in my department. A lot of activities are taking place! BTW, you can still show up, but I’m not sure if they are useful to you.

Sample 2

Sarah: Hey, Dima, How do you feel today?

Dima: I’m fine

Pain killers help

Sarah: get better soon sweetie, so you going shopping with me or not?

Dima: I think I can’t go, can we put it off?

Sarah: Don’t worry, we can put it off for sure. Not that important.