

USING MULTILINGUAL DIGITAL LITERACIES FOR DEVELOPING LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIP: CASE STUDY OF THREE OMANI COUPLES

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Abstract

This case study centers on the multilingual literacy practices of three Omani couples who are developing long distance relationships via the internet. The questions guiding the study are: How is the use of digital literacy mediating the relationship between the correspondents? What verbal and non-verbal resources are the correspondents using and producing? The data was gathered by means of depth interviews with the three women correspondents and by building of a sample of texts from their correspondence. During the data collection I gave the necessary attention to research ethic. The data analysis focused on MSN chat texts, e-mails, and internet forum contributions. A number of verbal and non-verbal features were identified in the texts used and produced by the correspondents in the study. These included: the use of terms of endearment and how their use developed over time, the use of different genres, the use of emoticons and other semiotic resources, the creative use of orthography, the use of code switching as a contextualization cue, orthography switching, the use of indirectness to talk about the self, and the use of digital literacy and digital resources for entertainment.

1. Introduction

1.1 New times in Oman, a new generation and new practices

The period of Sultan Qaboos bin Said's rule, which began on 23rd of July, 1970, with the Sultan's ascent to the throne, is often referred to as the 'Renaissance'. Quite literally, this marked a re-birth for Oman and its citizens. The last four decades have seen a gradual transformation of Omani society: there has been increased emphasis on education, on development and on the creation of a modern Islamic nation. This process has been accelerated over the last two decades with the new global order, with the rapid spread of new communications technology and with the new opportunities for travel that have been opened up for many Omanis.

These changes have been most evident in public life in Oman, for example, in education, in government and in the media. But people's private lives and everyday practice are also changing. A new generation of modern Omani citizens emerged and they are communicating with each other in different ways. Widespread use is made of the internet, particularly among the new educated classes in the urban areas of Oman.

The focus of this study is on one particular practice that is emerging, a new literacy practice, which is internet-based: this is courtship correspondence prior to marriage, which makes extensive use of new technology. This study presents a case study of three couples, who have not yet met face to face, but who are engaging in long-distance courtship correspondence. Although my focus is on just three couples, this appears to be a much wider practice in Oman. It has been introduced by young Omanis who have the opportunity to travel outside the country. It is also multilingual correspondence which reflects their cosmopolitan experience. It is one of remarkable social changes taking place in Oman at the moment.

1.2 Aims and research questions

This case study focuses on the courtship via correspondence that was developed between three prospective Omani couples. Each prospective couple has never engaged in face to face conversation and they are separated by geography. The correspondence is ongoing so my research questions below are in the simple present tense, and focus on the conventions and emerging correspondence habits and practices.

The main aim of this study was to address the following questions:

1. How does the use of digital literacy mediate the relationship of the correspondents?
2. What verbal resources and non-verbal features do they use and produce?

1.3 The nature of this study

This research was designed as a series of three case studies of Omani couples correspondents engaging in conversation correspondence via the internet. The case study approach allowed me to achieve depth of insight that would not have been possible if I had worked with a large sample of correspondents. The focus of my analysis was on their digital literacy practices, though I also carried out in-depth interviews with each of the women correspondents involved. Because of the intimate nature of the correspondence and the trust shown to me by the participants in this study, every effort has been made to guarantee confidentiality.

2. Literature review

This brief review of the literature that is relevant to the study I am presenting here, aims to give an insight in the topic in its broader sense. It will help to identify what has been done previously, showing what this study would provide and add to the literature. Firstly, I will shed some light on the new literacy studies that shift the focus to be on studying the use of literacies as part of social practices. This study would be considered as one of these types of studies. Secondly, some light will be thrown on the use of digital literacies, MSN, and e-mails to find out what has been done in this vein. I will review the studies of instant messaging and what has been done in terms of what the new media age offers for correspondence. Also, I will highlight some of the previous studies that have been done on correspondence such as letters and their impact on mediating relationships. I aim to identify the difference between these types of correspondence and the new media age correspondence. Finally, I will talk about research on code switching in speech and writing since these are the areas of research which I drew on in the data analysis.

2.1 Research on literacy

2.1.1 New Literacy Studies

A recent shift in perspective has emphasized understanding of literacy as a social and cultural practice and has called for the study of literacy practices as situated in their social and cultural contexts. These social developments have sometimes been referred to as 'New Literacy Studies' (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Heath, 1983; Street, 1993). The focus is on new communicative practices in which written text is combined with images and other semiotic resources, sometimes referred to as 'multimodality' or 'multiliteracies'.

The field of new literacy studies has offered further concepts to help answer some questions including the concepts of 'literacy events' and of 'literacy practices'. A literacy event is characterized by Shirley Brice Heath as "any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes" (Heath, 1983, p.50). Equally important, literacy practices are in the simplest sense what people do with literacy but this concept has a broader, more abstract sense. Literacy practices are observable but they are also more like conventions (established or emerging conventions) that people follow and they also involve values, attitudes, feelings and social relationships (Street, 1993).

Some recent critiques of these 'new' approaches to literacy refer to 'the limit of the local'. As Collins and Bolt (2003) state the 'situated' approach to literacy does not give sufficient recognition to the ways in which literacy usually comes from outside of a particular community's 'local' experience. More recently, Maddox (2005) has attempted to bring together the 'situated' approach with that of 'New Literacy Studies' to explore the relationship and he critiques NLS for its "reluctance... in examining the role of literacy capabilities and practices in progressive forms of social change and the production of agency" (Street and Lefstein, 2007, p. 43). Like Brandt and Clinton, Maddox (2005) wants to recognize the force of 'outside' influences associated with literacy, including the potential for helping people move out of 'local' position and take account of progressive themes in the wider world.

2.1.2 Digital literacies, MSN, and email

2.1.3

A considerable amount of work has been developed around the area of digital literacies such as instant messaging (IM) that is defined as "Internet-based synchronous text chat, with point-to-point communication between users on the same system (Lee, 2007). In general, these studies have moved beyond the identification of linguistic features to studying social issues associated with IM. Programs that support IM are called instant messengers, such as WhatsApp, eBuddy messenger (<http://www.ebuddy.com>) and MSN Messenger (<http://www.msn.com>). These programs are very popular especially among young people, and they have become a crucial part of their lives. For example in Hong Kong, over 1.2 million people are IM users (20% of the total population), and among whom 85% are young people aged 12 to 29 years, (Lee, 2007).

In considering literacy practices involving new technologies, NLS researchers have also become interested in what the new media age does and does not offer for correspondence to facilitate representation of meanings. Images, sounds, emoticons, sharing documents and videos are some of what the new media does offer for correspondence and these are called "affordances" that are defined by Bearne and Kress (2001) as "what is made possible and facilitated, and what is made difficult and inhibited" (p. 91).

Within the NLS, among the few published studies of IM, Lewis and Fabos (2005) understand IM as socially mediated. They focused on the literacy practices concerning language and social networking in IM and discussed how social identities are shaped by IM. Beside this, there is a study by Lee (2007), who gathered a range of data from chat texts, using participant observation, logbook keeping, and semi structured interviews to find out the factors influencing ways of choosing linguistic resources in IM. Lee identified seven factors that can help explain the variation and diversity of text-making practices in relation to new communication technology. These factors are: perceived expressiveness of the language, user identification with the language, technical constraints of inputting methods, speed, and perceived practicality of the writing system.

2.1.4 Studies of correspondence

Many studies have focused their interest on analyzing letter writing as a peculiarly, versatile and diverse literacy practice. As a text container, the letter can be used to mediate a huge range of human interactions and many social practices. In a recent study of everyday literacy practices in one town in England, Barton and Hamilton (1998) found a range of letter writing activities, including personal letters sent between family and friends. Personal letters were the most common form of sustained writing encountered in the study. Other studies of community literacy practices have also revealed a variety of uses for letter writing and have displayed the mostly dynamic quality of letter writing and reading in people's lives, Barton and Hall (2000), Besnier (1995). Insights into the social richness of letter writing could be considered as one of the most interesting things that emerged from these studies.

The social richness and uses of letter writing was demonstrated in Besnier's study of Pacific Islanders (1995). In particular, personal letters were used to express forms of affect and emotion which people did not express orally. Many researchers have maintained that written communication is typically less effective than oral communication (Chafe 1982; Chafe and Danielewicz 1987; DeVito 1966, 1967; Redeker 1984). However, Besnier states that this conclusion was a result of the fact that researchers have typically based their research on academic writing, in which writers are expected to pose as objective and unemotional. Besnier (1988) and some other researchers such as Tannen (1982), and Biber (1986) challenge the characterization of writing as a medium in which little affect surfaces. One of the most striking results of the analysis of Nukulaelae islanders' letters by Besnier (1988, 1995) is the fact that letters rank higher than any other Nukulaelae spoken or written register in terms of affective-involvement markers. He suggested that, on Nukulaelae, letters are used to channel certain types of affective displays which are not judged as appropriate in face-to-face interactions (Street, 1993).

Furthermore, Ahearn (2000) writes about an ethnographic and linguistic study of how love letter writing, as a new practice in a Nepalese community, is situated within the social contexts in which villagers read and write (Barton and Hall, 2000). Love letters, previously non-existent in the Nepalese community, have in a very short period of time become an intrinsic feature of the practices of courtship and marriage. In Ahearn's study, considerable evidence of social and negative change can be seen in the love letters that Junigau's young residents have begun to write in recent years as these correspondents negotiate their relationships and identities.

Moreover, Ahearn believes that significant changes in family patterns and power dynamics in the village are due to the novel practice of exchanging such letters over a protracted courtship. Ahearn included in her study the correspondence between two individuals, Shila Devi and Vajar Bahadur, who carried on a lengthy courtship of over two years and wrote frequent love letters to each other, even though they lived a mere ten minutes' walk apart. From the start of their courtship, promises of lasting love were made by both in their letters, and it continued to be mainly in their letters that they expressed their deeply felt emotions. Lystra (1989) finds that, in the US in the nineteenth century, romantic love as expressed in love letters had the effect of creating "some special experience within an individual before marriage that was not shared by others".

2.2 Code switching in speech and writing

2.2.1 Code switching in speech

A great many scholars in sociolinguistics use a definition of *codeswitching* proposed by John Gumperz (1982): "Conversational code switching can be defined as the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems" (Gumperz, 1982, p.59). Others define code switching with slight nuances of difference, for example, Auer (1984,p.1) refers to "the alternating use of more than one language," while Heller (1988a,p.1) defines it as "the use of more than one language in the course of a single communicative episode". Also, Myers-Scotton (1993,p.vii) mentions "the use of two or more languages in the same conversation." And, finally, Nilep appears the following definition "Code switching is defined as the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements so as to contextualize talk in interaction," (Nilep, 2006).

As early as 1988, Monica Heller approached code-switching as a social process and wished to show how in order to study it, anthropological and sociolinguistic questions must be asked about the relation between linguistic choices and social processes in any interpretation and construction of social reality. Whether socio-interactional, discursive or referential, the significance of code-switching can only be grasped by placing it in the context of a multilingual community where "strategies of definition, negotiation and indexation of common reference systems [are] distributed" (Heller,1988).

Gumperz (1982) introduced a distinction between 'situational switching' and 'metaphorical switching'. Situational switching, as the term implied, was triggered by a change in the situation. In this type of code switching, speakers only one of the co-available languages or language varieties is appropriate for a particular situation. Metaphorical switching, on the other hand, refers to changes in the speaker's language choice when the situation remains the same. In this case, for the speaker to code switch is thought to convey special communicative intent because it is a departure from what is expected. Gumperz (1982) also referred to metaphorical code switching as a possible 'contextualization cue' in conversation. He saw it as a way of 'saying something' and, at the same time, adding further meaning to what is said; that is, a way of contextualizing meanings in the ongoing flow of conversation. Other contextualization cues are change of pitch or intonation, use of gestures and eye gaze, and so on.

Code switching is only one of many resources available to bilingual or multilingual speakers. It invites a detailed, perhaps multi-layered analysis, which can demonstrate that in addition to speaker's capacity of highlighting the status of the on-going conversation, code switching as a contextualization cue has the capacity to 'bring about' higher level social meanings such as the speaker's language attitudes, preferences, norms and values, Auer (1999).

The pragmatic and expressive meaning carried by switches has increasingly come to focus. Gumperz sees "languages in a bilingual environment as inevitably expressing meanings of solidarity, informality and compassion (the in-group or we-code), or formality, stiffness and distance (the out-group or they-code)" (Gumperz 1982, p.66).

By knowing the details of the local we-they situations, the intention and meanings of the switches can be extrapolated by listeners and researchers perceiving the switch (Stroud 1992,p.132). The effects of a code-switch can range from signalling a distinction between direct and reported speech, to clarifying or emphasizing a message, to qualifying a message or to signalling the degree of speaker involvement in the talk.

Code switching is socially meaningful and is seen as appealing to the rights, obligations and identities associated with each language, Myers-Scotton (1993) ; Heller (1988). In framing research on code- switching within an ethnographic perspective which attends to details in how people perceive their lives and in understanding the societal dynamics, it is possible to gain deeper insights into the meanings conveyed.

Thus, the study of Omanis code switching between varieties of Arabic and English throws light on the meanings exchanged in a specific type of written genre and the code switching is viewed as a means of performing modern cosmopolitan identity.

2.2.2 Code switching in writing

Code-switching has been analyzed essentially on the basis of oral production. Little attention has been focused on code-switching in written production, in writing on paper and in electronic writing. One exception to this is the work of Sebba (2000).

In public and institutional writing, however, conservative pressures tend to confine authors to the use of a single dominant language even though they may be able to read and write several. In contrast, where writing is for private and semi-private purposes, such as in diaries and letters, multiliterate authors may code-switch and code-mix as they do in speaking. Sometimes their purpose is to hide; preserve privacy.

As Androutopoulos (2007), Lee (2007) and Martin-Jones (2009) have pointed out globalization and the new technoscapes opened up as a result of advances in computer technology have created new spaces for informal multilingual communication across time and space. For example, media resources like instant messaging, e-mail, facebook, blogs and internet discussion forums. The establishment of web 2 has also made it possible to write on the web as well as to receive and access information (Lee, 2007). Multilingual users of the internet, such as those in this study, are exploring new ways of communicating using all their language resources.

Finally, to add to the literature of NLS, this paper presents a case study of how a deep relationship is being built by using multilingual, digital literacies. The aim is to show what the new media age does offer for correspondence when the real life conversations between men and women fail to give an opportunity for personal expression. This study also shows how identities are gradually revealed and constructed through such correspondence and how knowledge, beliefs, feelings, emotions, among other things, are exchanged through the different literacies and features of texts that the individuals produce. The emphasis is on what the new media age offers for multilingual correspondents. Through this exploratory research, the present paper intends to add something quite new to what has been previously discussed in the literature on NLS, digital literacies and the studies of correspondence.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Data collection

3.1.1 Setting up the Project

The participants in this research are three Omani women aged around 23 and 26. They are all enrolled in MA level study in English speaking countries. Since they and I have similar interests and we usually talk about issues of marriage, marriage proposals, and who is engaged and who is not, recruiting them to the project was a natural extension of these conversations. Their interesting stories of marriage proposals encouraged me to think of this project and to approach them to take part as participants.

3.1.2 Gathering of textual data

The textual data presented in this case study were gathered selectively from the ongoing correspondence of the three participants. They are developing long distance relationships using digital literacies. Selected texts were saved by the three women. Fortunately, two of the participants had stored all the e-mails, pictures, documents, videos and MSN text conversations that had been exchanged between them and their correspondents since the beginning of the relationship. One of them indicated that she had created a specific folder in her PC for storing all the correspondence and that this had been categorized in different files accordingly to the different types of content, such as having a file for the pictures she had received from her correspondent, another file for storing the MSN chat conversations and so on. She mentioned that she had stored them because she felt that she wanted to keep everything between her and her correspondent to be recalled at any time as sweet memos and because they had had a great impact on her and on her correspondent at a very significant social period in their life.

However, the third participant had not saved any MSN chat conversations or did not intend to save the correspondence, but it proved to be quite feasible of recall old emails, MSN chat conversations and topics shared in internet forums and this helped me to gather many rich and original forms of textual data. Different ways of saving textual data were used such as notepads, print screen and Microsoft word documents.

The data that will be used in this study are taken selectively and retrospectively from the textual material that the three participants had accumulated. The data are very rich and very original as well. Moreover, this was spontaneous correspondence which began well before I began collecting textual data.

3.1.3 In-depth interviews

To avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation of the data, I undertook several interviews with the participants to gain insights into their understanding of the correspondence. In the interviews, we discussed every single item of data that is going to be presented in this study and talked about how to interpret it. This work was therefore ethnographically-informed (Humbenger, 1995) since it took account of participants' perspectives. However, because of the intimate nature of the correspondence, it was obviously not possible to do ethnographic observation of the exchange of texts. This research could be characterized as 'empowering research' as it is understood by (Cameron, et al., 1994) to be research on, for, and with. It means doing research on the literacy practices of my subjects and, in this project; it meant gathering data from them following the usual conventions of data collection. It also meant doing research for them, in other words, describing this newly established social practice of marriage proposals and demonstrating the need felt by young people for this channel of communication, even though it may be frowned upon by certain sectors of the Omani community. Researching for my participants also meant getting involved in understanding their interests and understanding their feelings and the circumstances that led them to approach these new practices of using digital literacy for developing long distance relationships. Research 'with' implied the use of interactive or dialogic research methods as (Cameron, et al., 1994) stated. 'Empowering research' or seeking my participants' active co-operation required revelation of my research goals, assumptions and procedures.

Cameron, et al., (1994) highlighted three main issues to be borne in mind in applying the principle of 'empowering research'. The first issue is that 'persons should not be treated as objects' and respectful, trust worthy treatment is essential. In this research project, the researched were fully respected. Their interactions, ideas and feelings were understood and appreciated. The quality and validity of the research were not affected by my close and open relationship with the participants since the textual data collected existed well before I began this research. However, the interaction between us at the analysis stage enhanced my understanding and interpretation of the textual data collected. The second issue raised by Cameron, et al. is the subjects' agenda. Dealing with the agendas of my participants and my own agenda was not a major problem. Most of the interactions and dialogues took place when we were all free going together to picnics or spending holidays together. I exploited most of the time when we were all together in the train travelling or having a cup of tea together and so on. What helps most in my research is that the subjects were interested in the topic and it concerned them a lot so they enjoyed discussing and talking about anything related to it. The third issue is 'If knowledge is worth having, it is worth sharing' (Cameron, et al., 1994, p.24).

3.2 Research ethics

To keep the data presented in this study ethically sound, permission from the three participants and their correspondents was requested. Throughout the research I followed the code of practice published by the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL) (See appendix 1). A consent form was prepared and signatures were received from all the participants. The correspondents had a look at what has been selected to be presented and they had no problem with any of the presented data. But because they wanted to keep their names and their email addresses hidden, they chose independently, with their correspondents, some nick names to be used in this study to refer to them. Due to their request to keep their emails and their names in the emails and MSN conversations hidden, I tried to conceal them using a grey color to make it hidden. In some cases, I changed the names used in the MSN chat conversations to the nick names chose by the participants in order to follow their wishes and at the same time make the data accessible and understandable for the readers. The paint program was used to clear up any unwanted data and to cut out or grey out and hide the names and the email addresses.

4. Data Analysis

In the process of analyzing texts produced by the three sets of correspondent, some features were found (see the table below).

The three sets of textual data gathered from the three participants were analyzed and categorized accordingly to the features that were found in the texts produced by the correspondents. Some of the features were found in all three sets of correspondence but some of the features were found just in one or two sets of data. However, from the interviews, I learned that some missing features from some of the data do not mean that the correspondents do not use it. Each set of data were analyzed separately and were compared to other sets of data in order to identify some common features of the texts produces digitally.

Since the data presented are multilingual, some long passages of data were translated in text box and the short ones were translated in bubbles. The following table shows the features that were found in each set of data.

Features		Elegant and Al Bel	Sunrise and Pilot	Noor and Jasim
Terms of endearment		√	√	√
Use of different genres		√		√
Creative use of orthography		√	√	
Use of vowel repetition within a word			√	
Use of emoticons and other semiotic re		√	√	√
Orthography Switching	Arabic used in Eng	√	√	
	English used in Ar	√	√	√
	Non-standard orth in English		√	
Code switching	Between English &	√	√	√
	Between varieties Arabic	√	√	√
	Other languages & Balochi)	√		
Code switching is a contextualization c		√		
Code switching as a discourse mode			√	
Use of digital literacy for entertainmen				√
Indirectness use to talk about the self			√	

From the above table, we can see that there are many common features shared between the three sets of participants. The missing of some of the features from any set of data does not actually indicate that the set of participants do not use these features but the matter can be attributed to the limited data collected. For example, from the interview, I learned that the use of vowel repetition within a word and use of digital literacies and digital resources for entertainment were used by all the three sets of participants.

4. Data Analysis

In the process of analyzing texts produced by the three sets of correspondent, some features were found. These features are as follow:

4.1 Terms of endearment expressions of affection and changes over time

Looking at the early MSN conversations, I rarely found any terms of endearment. Conversations were started with greetings like 'Hi', 'Good morning', or 'good afternoon'. From the interview, I learned that there was no use of endearment terms at the beginning of the relationship. Some formal terms were used in Arabic such as 'sister', or 'dear sister', 'brother', and 'dear brother'. Over time, terms of endearment occurred more often and, gradually, there was a shift from English terms of endearment to French and then to Arabic ones. The later terms are very strong and affective endearment terms compared with English terms, since Arabic is the native language of the correspondents. This development in the use of these terms shows how the relationship developed and became stronger over time. For example, 'dear' and 'darling' are the most frequent ones and the term 'عويني', [my eye] is used quite a lot as well. 'Honey', 'sweetie', 'je t'adore', 'عمري' means [my life], 'حياتي', means [my life] as well, and 'حبيبتي' that means [my lover] are some of the endearment terms that are produced in the texts.

4.2 Use of Different Genres

Different genres are used in the texts and discussions about books, writers, poems, poets, rhyme and rhythm are found in many of the MSN chat texts produced by the correspondents of this study. Stories and novels were exchanged as well. The first type of genre that was sent by Al Belushi to Elegant was an Arabic story about a girl called Misoon. The story talked about the girl Misoon and how she felt about being away from home. The story ends up with a very nice poem written by the girl Misoon. This story was sent to Elegant since she is away from

home as well, whereas Al Belushi was still at home but was preparing to travel abroad. Stories and poems were exchanged to express feelings that the correspondents shared. In the first emails, Al Belushi was clearly trying to send messages indirectly to elegant expressing his feelings and emotions using carefully selected and very expressive Arabic poems.

The use of different genres is a salient feature of the correspondence between Noor and Jasim since they are members in the Omani internet forum named 'Sablat Oman', <http://www.Omania2.net> and most of their contributions are different types of genres such as poems, short stories, articles, and dialogues. Some of their contributions have been quoted or copied from some other sources, whereas the majority of the different genres produced are from their own writings. Noor posted a short story as a participation in the forum. This story is entitled: 'A letter to my Dad'. Some parts of the story are translated to English and presented in the voice of the little daughter writing a letter to her dad. The letter is composed in Arabic while some lines are translated to English. What is fascinating is that, although this participation was posted to be read in public, it is in fact written by Noor and intended specifically for Jasim. From the interview, Noor talked about how her story affected Jasim and how he understood that it was meant to be for him as soon as he read the topic. Jasim also composed poems and posted them as public forum participations but again the poems were composed and meant for Noor in particular. The following poem was written by Jasim for Noor and the subject of the poem was 'between me and you'. It is an Arabic poem and the English translation is as follows:

Between me and you

Everything we share, we love becomes something between me and you

With love, all borders could be approached

With love, long distances become short and the short ones become shorter

If one of us felt broken heart, the other can vanish the bad feelings within a moment

And if one of us felt sad, a joke from the other or a blink of eye can make pleasure

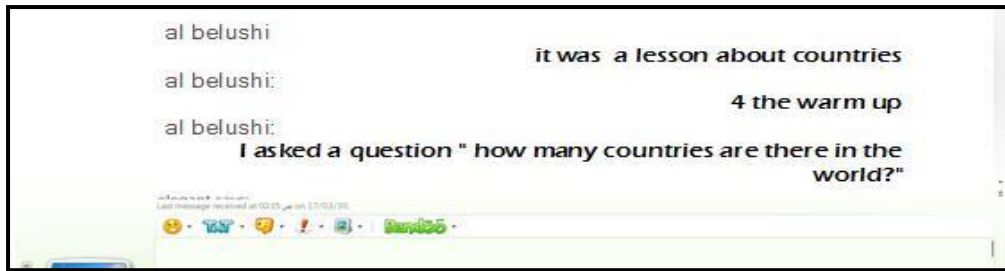
4.3 Creative Use of Orthography

English is the dominant language in the texts produced, as compared with other languages that are used by the two correspondents such as Arabic, French, and Baluchi. Interestingly, some Arabic words are produced in the texts using English orthography, though this includes English numbers produced creatively so that they look, to some extent, like Arabic orthography. The purpose is to present particular sounds of the Arabic language that English does not have. Giving examples from the texts that are produced by Al Belushi and Elegant would help to make this point clearer.

The Arabic word "الحمد لله" meaning [thanks to God] was written using the English alphabet plus number 7. Number 7 is used to represent the Arabic letter (ح) that represents an Arabic sound that has no equivalent in English. The phonetic sound to the Arabic phoneme (ح) is /h/ and it is phonetically described as a pharyngeal voiceless fricative phoneme. However, number 7 is used instead due to its shape that is similar to the shape of the Arabic letter (ح).

In this excerpt, the Arabic greeting phrase which is "السلام عليكم" was produced by using the English alphabet plus number 3. This time number 3 is used to represent (ع); the Arabic letter representing a sound that has no equivalent

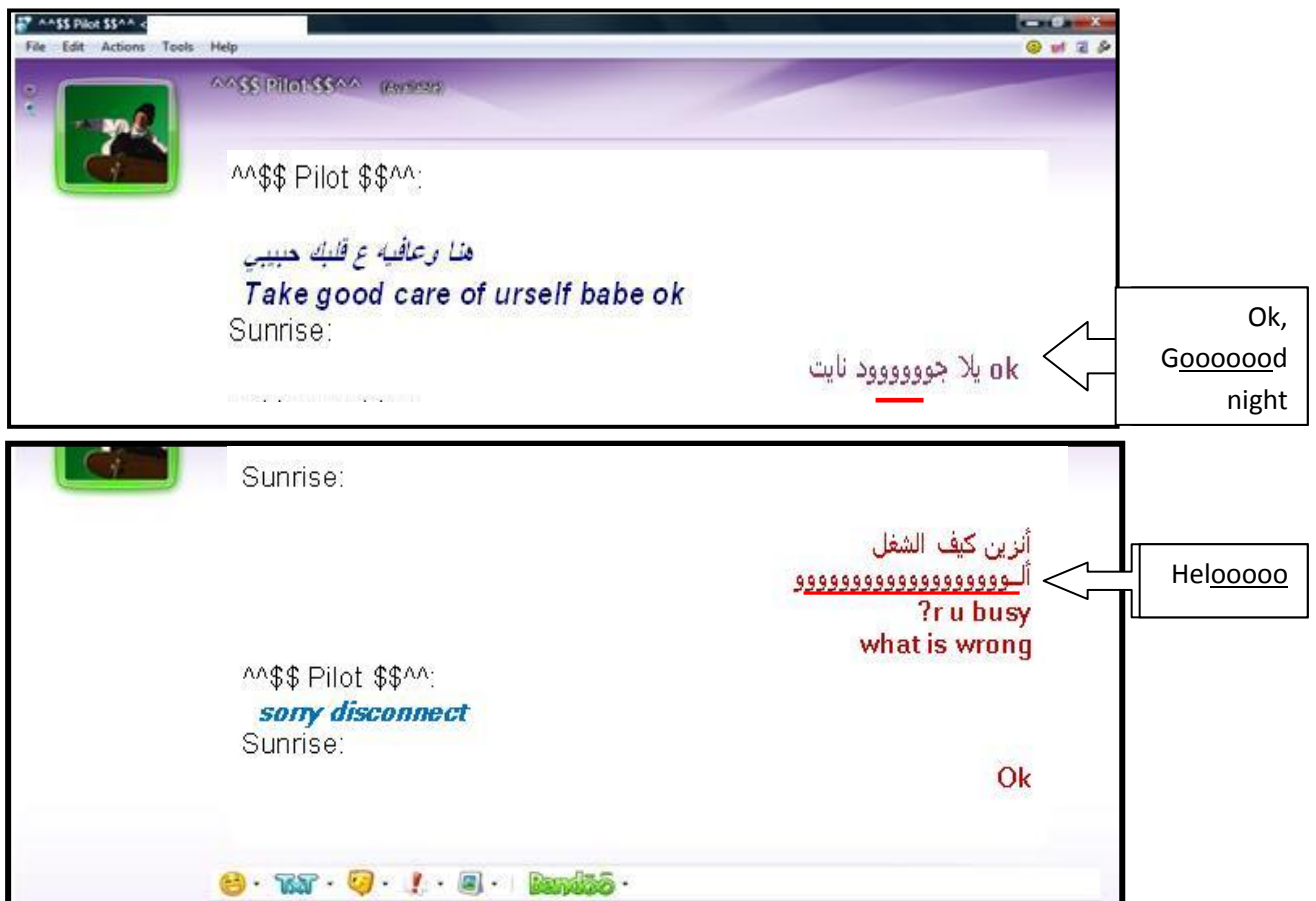
in English like the sound (ح). The phonemic value of the Arabic phoneme (ع) is /ʕ/. It is a pharyngeal voiced fricative phoneme.



In this excerpt, number 4 is used instead of writing the word 'for' due to the fact that these two English words are homophones and share the same sound contributions. Also number 2 is used in the produced texts instead of writing the preposition 'to'. The uses of these numerical conventions reflect the familiarity of the two correspondents with wider conventions for abbreviation associated with new media correspondence. Again, this says something about their identities, as young, educated Omanis, making full use of the resources of the digital age.

4.4 Use of vowel repetition within a word

Repeating a particular vowel within a word is commonly used in these digital literacies. In this set of data, it is mainly used to emphasise a word in a sentence, for example:



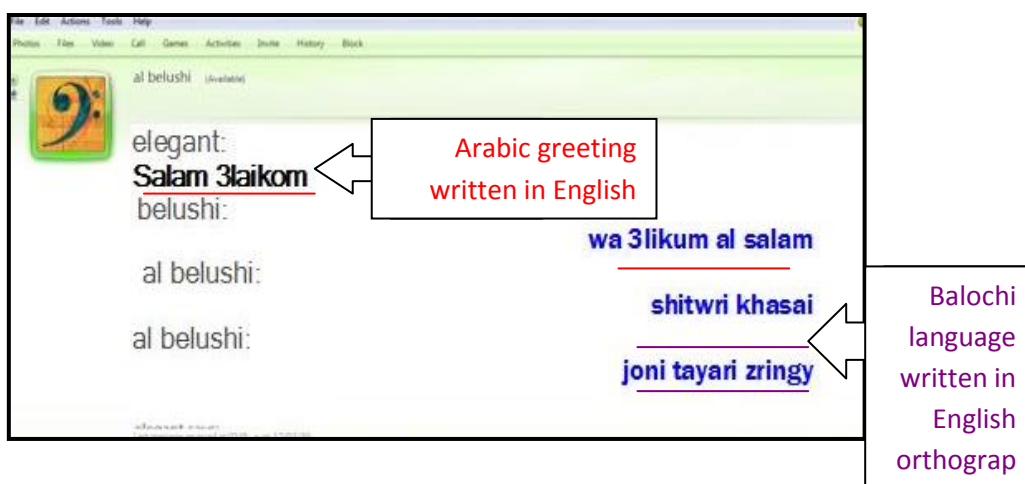
Again, the use of the repeated vowel conveys informality and indexes the close relationship that is developing.

4.5 Use of Emoticons and other Semiotic Resources

Emoticons are used quite a lot in the e-mails and the MSN chat texts produced by the correspondents in this study in order to express feelings and to capture facial expressions, or they are used as hedges and fillers. Pictures and photographs have also been exchanged as the relationship has been built up and the correspondents have got to know more about each other and their families. They have, for example, been exchanging many folders, files, maps, different genres and pictures of their little siblings as attachments.

4.6 Code switching and orthography switching

A feature of switching between languages and orthographies was found. These languages are English, Omani Arabic, Gulf Arabic, standard Arabic Balochi, and French. There were some Arabic words written in English orthography as well as the Balochi language since it is just a spoken language and has no orthography. Some examples follow:



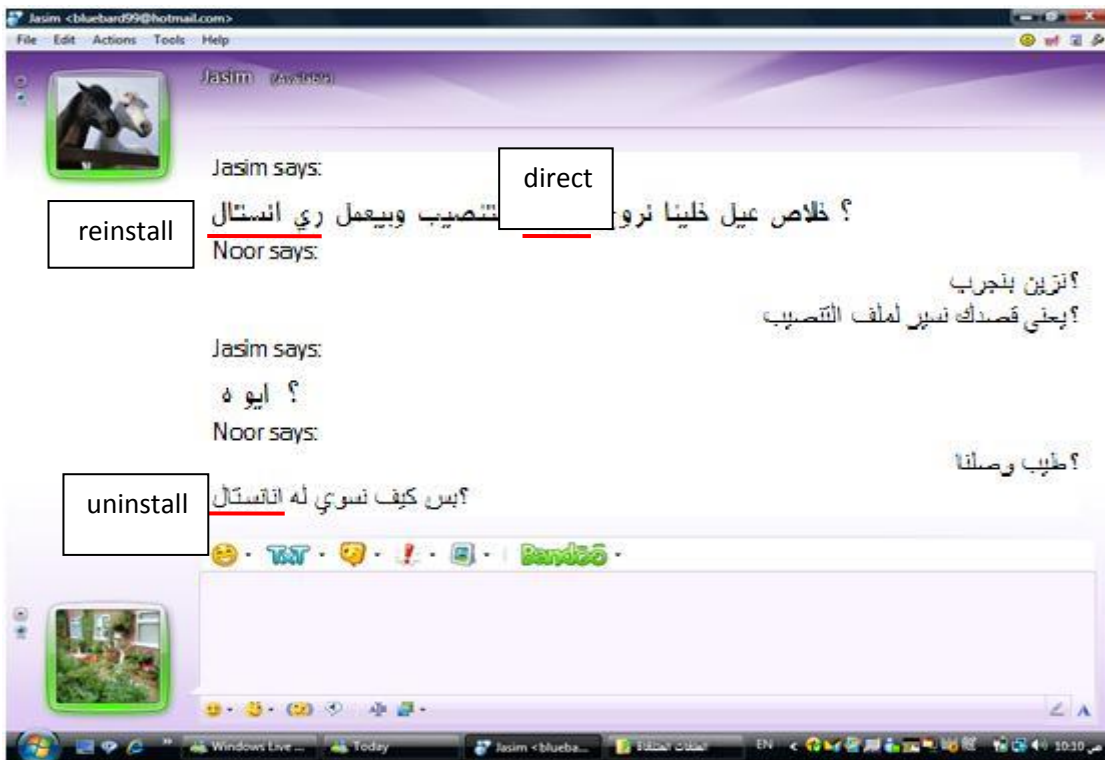
4.7 Non-standard orthography in English

Also, in some parts of conversations, the use of colloquial spoken English is represented in non-standard written forms in the conversation. This also constructs the conversation as very informal, as ‘talk’ rather than ‘writing’. For example:



4.8 Code switching

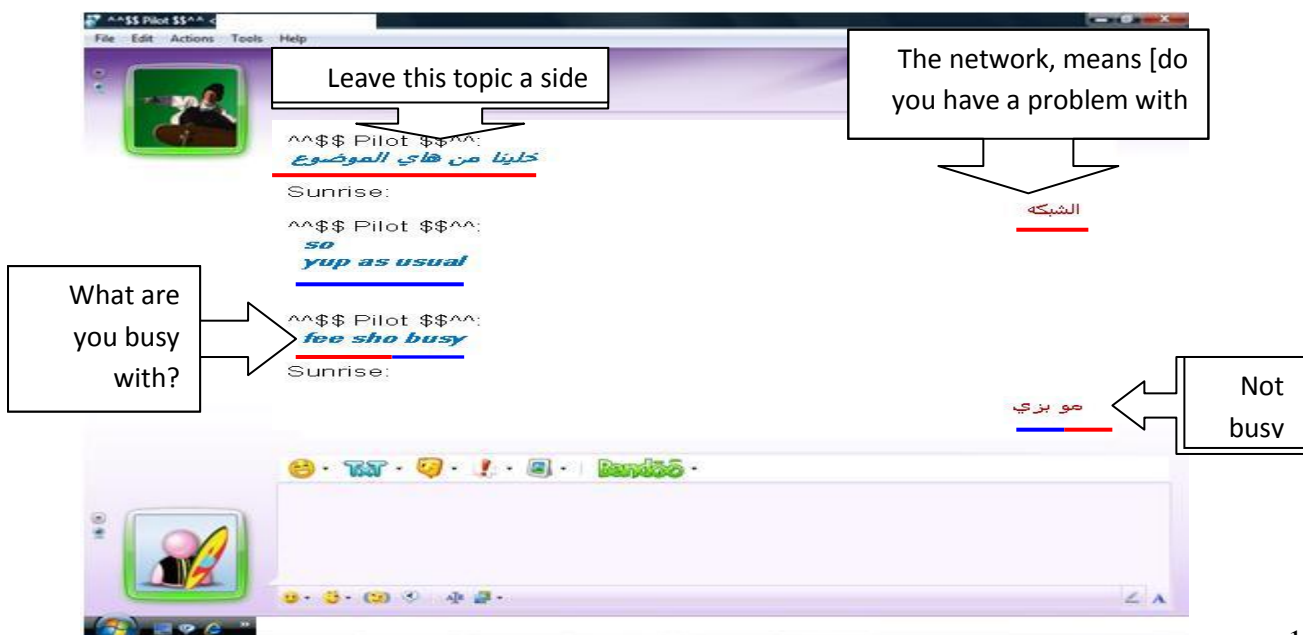
The most common used language in the set of Noor and Jasims' data is standard Arabic since these two correspondents are members of the Omani forum and most of their participations are written in Standard Arabic. However, Omani Arabic and some English are used in MSN chat conversations and e-mails.



In this set of data from MSN chat conversation, the adherence to standard Arabic orthography is noticeable. There are many English terms that were written using Arabic orthography whereas the opposite was not found.

4.8.1 Code switching between Arabic and English languages

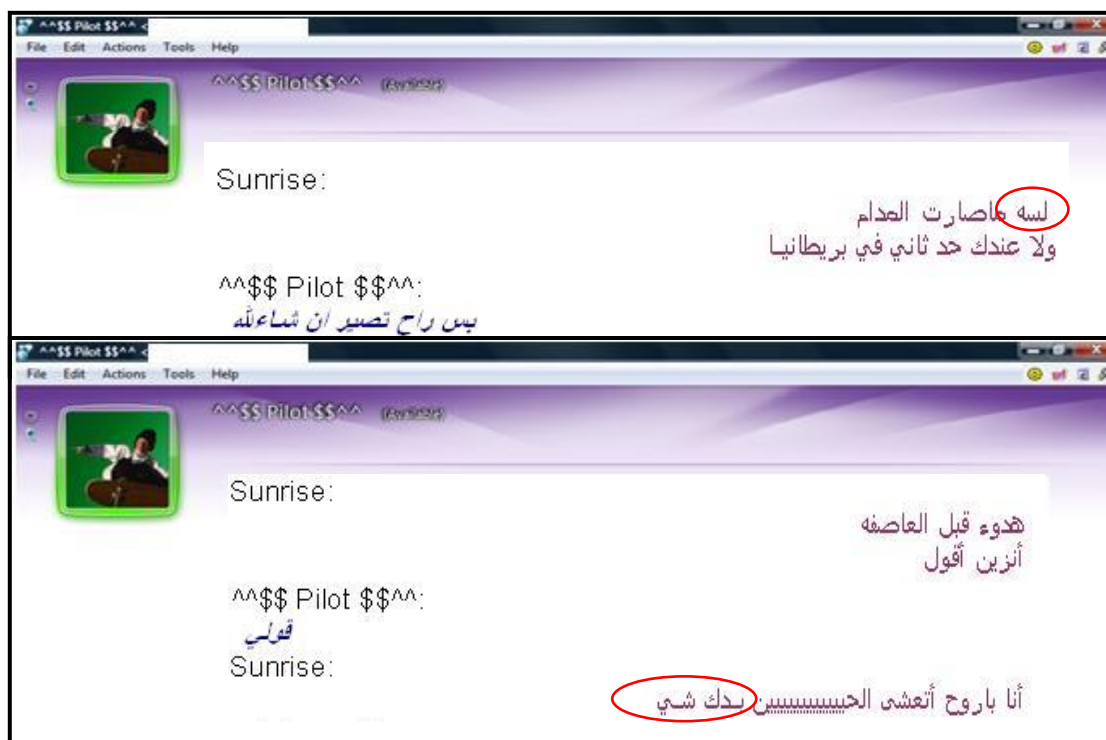
In this set of conversations, switching mostly takes the form of Arabic and English switching and switching between varieties of Arabic such as Egyptian Arabic, Gulf Arabic, and Omani Arabic. Some examples of switching between Arabic and English are as follows:



From the above message, we can see fluent and smooth switching between the English and Arabic languages. The underlined words with blue colour are English, some are written in English orthography and some are in Arabic orthography while the words underlined with red are Arabic words and again some are written in Arabic letters and some are in English letters. This style of communication, involving smooth switching between the two languages, conveys the cosmopolitan, multilingual identities of the two correspondents. Since the communication is very informal and since this is unregulated space for writing, the communication is more multilingual than it would be in a formal exchange.

4.8.2 Code switching between varieties of Arabic

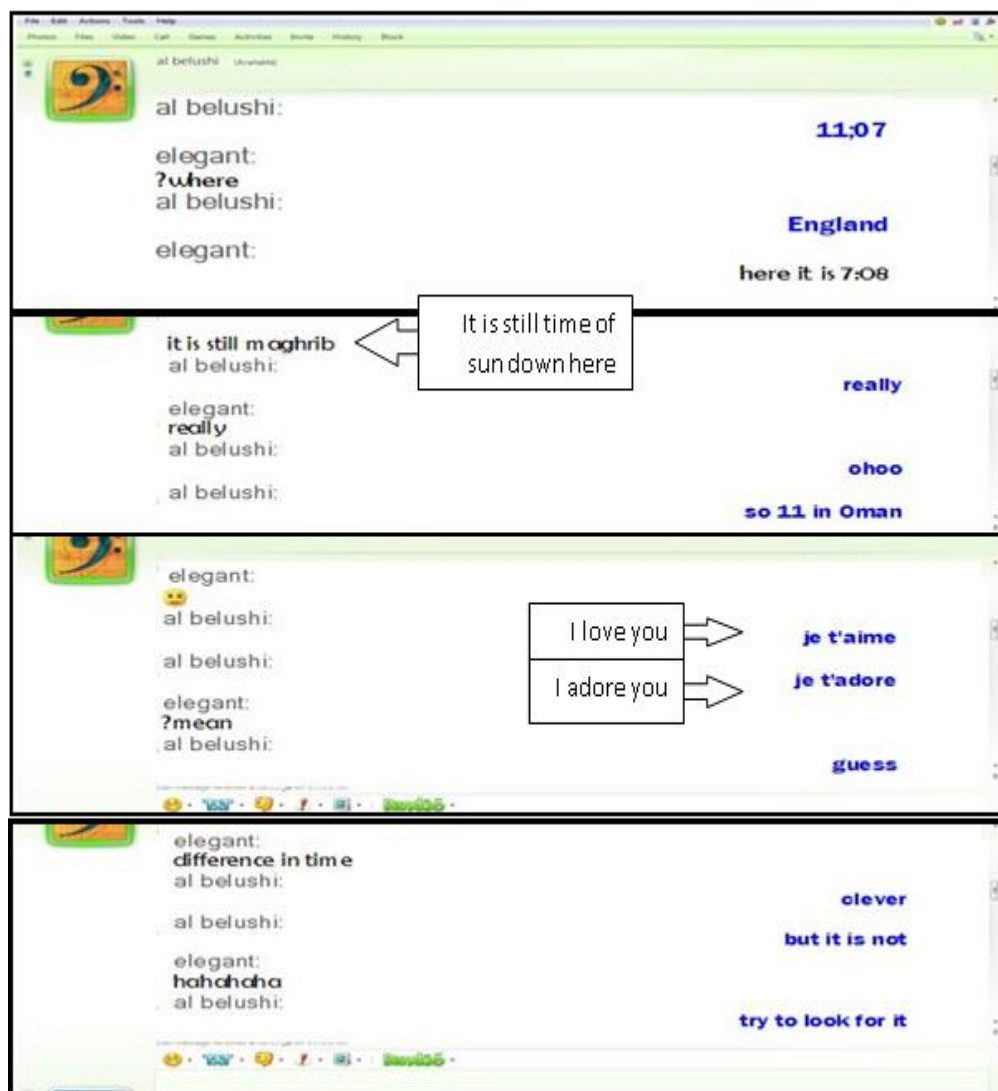
While reading the conversations between Sunrise and Pilot, the use of varieties of Arabic is particularly noticeable. A mix of Omani Arabic, Gulf Arabic, and Bedouin Arabic is common. In addition, some Egyptian Arabic terms are used by Sunrise such as the following:



4.9 Code switching and contextualization cues

As I indicated earlier, code switching into Arabic occurred in terms of endearment. It also occurred on other items of vocabulary, such as the time of day. In the example, below, we see Elegant using the Arabic term for sunset or sundown: *maghrib*. In the same exchange, Al Belushi switches into French, saying 'je taime and je tadore'. As I pointed out earlier, Al Belushi is multilingual and speaks two languages that Elegant does not speak (French and Balochi).

Code switches such as these are contextualization cues which add extra meaning to what is said. The use of Arabic for 'sunset' evokes the context of Oman where the correspondents have a shared experience of 'sunsets'. The use of French, from Al Belushi's point of view, could have been motivated by wanting to sound exotic and intriguing. But this switch into French leads to a communicative tangle, as shown below:



In these excerpts, the failure of getting the meaning of the French words was attributed to the lack of a discourse context for interpreting the French words but in these two excerpts the repeated translations helped Elegant to get the meanings easily. Al Belushi's use of code switching as a contextualization cue, adds extra meanings to his contribution to the MSN exchange and it appears to have the effect of making his contribution more complex, intriguing and exotic.

Code switching of this kind occurs most often in informal, unregulated spaces of communication, in speech and in writing. And, over time, Al Belushi's recurring use of code switching between English, Arabic, French, and Baluchi contributes to the construction of a modern cosmopolitan Omani identity.

4.8.5 Code switching as a discourse mode

Sometimes the switching from English to Arabic or vice versa does not appear to have any particular function. There are no obvious contextualization cues. These exchanges are examples of 'unmarked code switching' or code switching as a discourse mode (Scotton, 1983). The following extract of a conversation will illustrate this: Sunrise initiated the conversation, with greetings using Arabic written in English orthography plus some English words like 'fine', and Pilot did the same. The use of an Arabic greeting sounds friendlier and expresses a shared heritage. The use of informality indicates the close relationship developing between the two correspondents. Then the reply of Pilot 'am fine, nothing to be worried about, I was fine' triggered a switch by Sunrise to the use of Arabic and Arabic orthography, showing her concern for his health, while Pilot sticks to using English and he switched to Arabic when he decided to change the topic.



Here is the translation of the above conversation scripts;

Sunrise:

salam

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

hello

how are you

Sunrise:

fine

What about you?

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

am fine

no thing to be warried about

i was fine

Sunrise:

Mmmm are you sure

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

yup am just in bad mood now days

no thing else

Sunrise:

Why

It is fine if you don't want to talk

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

i don know

just like that

Sunrise:

Aha ok

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

no reason

Sunrise:

Maybe you are thinking of something

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

yeah thats right

Sunrise:

Ok what is this thing that makes you thinking?

That is fine if u don't wanna talk

I totally understand

\$\$^Pilot ^\$\$:

Leave this topic a side

As it is seen from this set of data of Sunrise and Pilot, there is almost no use of standard Arabic.

4.4 Use of digital literacy and digital resources for entertainment

There are many e-mails exchanged between Noor and Jasim for sheer entertainment and fun. Some of these e-mails were jokes, puzzles, and games. Some examples are as follows:



The joke above is written in Arabic. The English translation is as follows:

There were couples who abhor each other. They were attempting to make troubles for each other. One husband went to a devil to make up a great calamity for his wife. The devil gave him a plan and he quickly convinced with the plan and went. Then the wife went to the devil as well, of course, each of them went to the devil without the knowledge of the other party. The devil made up a plan but the wife didn't approve it. She went to the devil for a more harmful plan. The devil made up another plan. But again she didn't feel convinced. Then she went to the devil that she will tell him a plan and she wants his opinion. As soon as the devil listened to her plan he was shocked and moved away with frightened. The devil asked her to fear god and don't do such an unbecoming trouble plan.

In brief, this case study has focused on the ways in which new communication spaces in the internet are being used for long distance courtship. I have emphasized that the use of digital literacy add an additional and different means of expressing feelings and developing relationship. It does not replace traditional hand-written love letters but add a new medium which has great immediacy, involving communication in real time, for instance, via MSN . It is a medium in which people use traditional literacy resources such as terms of endearment, poems, quotations (including quotations from religious texts) and words and phrases from different languages. However, the medium offers new affordances too, such as the use of different symbols, images, photographs and video film along with the written word. Today's texts, including the texts used and produced in courtship correspondence, are becoming more multimodal. Lastly, with globalization and the spread of English, particularly on the internet, the use of English, along with other languages has become more prevalent. Informal communications such as the texts I have described are becoming more multilingual as people travel more and build relationships across borders.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary and statement of main findings

From the analysis of the features of the three sets of text produced by the correspondents in this study, it appears that gradual change in the use of language and other semiotic resources contribute to the changing of the relationships between the three prospective couples and these relationships seem to be developing and getting stronger over the time. One can take, for example, the development of the use of endearment terms. The rapidity with which the relationships have developed could be attributed to what the new media age offers for facilitating correspondence through real time instant messaging. As compared with other media, such as internet forums, instant messaging helps to add a sense of vividness to the correspondence and reduces the long distance between correspondents so that they feel as if they were sitting together at a table.

Correspondence has also taken in a new visual dimension through the use of emoticons and other semiotic resources. Emoticons are sometimes used as hedges and sometimes for representing the facial expressions of the correspondents. They also add to the vividness of the chat texts and make up for the absence of the face-to-face dimension. We can never be sure of the extent of digital literacy in mediating relations in general, but from this study we can be sure that digital literacy had an undeniable role in mediating the relationship developing between prospective couples in different parts of the world and has clearly an impact on the correspondents in a way that might not be achieved by letter. This does not deny that other types of correspondence have a special impact on the correspondents, especially the ones written by hand which give the correspondents a direct link to the hand that wrote the letter. What it does is showing that new media, with new affordances, are opening up additional ways of engaging in the verbal arts associated with courtship.

In this study, I have endeavoured to show how digital literacies such as e-mails, MSN chat texts and Internet forum participations contribute to the development of long distance courtship among Omani couples and how courtship texts are produced using different languages, different language varieties, different genres, different terms of endearment, different emoticons and other semiotic resources. These communication resources made it possible for prospective Omani couples to share feelings, emotions and affect that would never be expressed orally due to the many reasons that would prevent them from doing so; the views of the community they come from, shyness or the fact that such feelings are difficult to express orally. An additional and unexpected finding related to the code switching in the writing: it is easier to interpret the use of multiple languages when communicating in a written mode. Thus, I showed that it was possible to interpret some of the contextualization cues created by code switching

in the digital chat texts because each correspondent could scroll up and down referring to a particular point in the conversation.

The creative use of orthography in this study could be attributed to the richness of the linguistic knowledge that the two correspondents have, including knowledge of the common use of particular orthographies and reduced forms (including numbers) in chat texts. Another explanation could be their greater familiarity with the use of English orthography on the keyboard of the computer than with Arabic orthography.

This technical constraint in putting text could have led the correspondents to produce Arabic words while making creative use of the English alphabet and using numbers to represent particular Arabic sounds that have no equivalent in the English language.

This study has shown three different ways of initiating correspondence in different times and different parts of the world using different new media affordances. Conducting in-depth interviews with the three participants of this study and analysing three sets of correspondence collected help unpacking the research question (How does the use of digital literacy mediate the relationship?) showing to some extent the capability of the different affordances of different resources of the new media age in playing a big part in mediating the relationship between correspondents. Focusing on the features of the texts produced by the three sets of participants and their correspondents, a number of verbal resources and non-verbal features were identified like the use of terms of endearment and how it developed, use of different genres, use of emoticons and other semiotic resources, creative use of orthography, code switching, contextualization cues, orthography switching, the use of indirectness to talk about the self, and the use of digital literacy and digital resources for entertainment.

5.2 Constraints on the study

Despite of the richness of data collected, some features were not found in some sets of correspondence while the interviews with the correspondents explicit their often use of such features. This gives an indication to that more features might be found if there were more textual data collected. Also, the current on-going relationships developing between the participants and their correspondents signals new features might be used over time that this study could not indicate to. Joining more participants to this type of study was hard to find. Since this study is addressing some personal issues of courtship that some people may not like to share. Yet, having more participants may help to find some new other features.

5.3 Recommendation for further research

What we have not done here, and what remains to be done, is to find out some more other features of texts produced by correspondents developing long distance relationships because the interviews and the data analysis of this study gives an indication that there might be some that haven't mentioned here and need to be unpacked. Also, what needs to be done is to give more focus on examining the identities, personal characteristics, sense of humor, interests, knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and cultures of the correspondents. These could be to some extent identified from the digital literacies and digital affordances that correspondents developing long distance relationships share and produce since digital literacies are considered for such correspondents as the main source for expressing themselves and knowing about each other.

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Appendix 1



Recommendations for good practice in Applied Linguistics student projects

BAAL (The British Association for Applied Linguistics) has developed guidelines for applied linguists in their relation to the profession, colleagues, students, informants, and sponsors. The recommendations are relevant to professional applied linguists, and the core recommendations identified here apply as much to a student doing an essay for an undergraduate course as they do to a professor managing a large funded project. The numbers at the end of each section of this document refer to the corresponding section in the full "Recommendations", available at <http://www.baal.org.uk/goodprac.pdf>.

1. **General responsibility to informants.** You should respect the rights, interests, sensitivities, and privacy of people who provide you with your data ("informants"). You should think about and respect all aspects of identity including their culture, gender, and age. On the basis of this, try to anticipate any harmful effects or disruptions to informants' lives and environment, and to avoid any stress, intrusion, and real or perceived exploitation. [6.1]

2. **Obtaining informed consent.** You must get permission from anyone who provides you with data, whether spoken or written. To do this, you should let informants know anything about your project that might affect their willingness to participate: what your objectives are, what you will need from them, how much time it will take, and how you will keep their identities confidential, if that is necessary. When informants are under

16, you also need their parents' permission too. [6.2]

3. **Respecting a person's decision not to participate.** Informants have a right to refuse to participate in research, even if they said at the outset that they would. It is best to plan your project so that it does not depend entirely on the consent of one or two people. (6.3)

4. **Confidentiality and anonymity.** If you have not been given the right to identify participants, they must not be identifiable in any way (confidentiality) and in particular you must not use real names (anonymity). You should try to anticipate ways identities might accidentally be revealed: by including identifying details, pictures, or moving images, playing voices, or allowing unauthorized access to data on your computer or in your files. (6.4)

5. **Deception and covert research.** Deception is unacceptable because it violates the principles of informed consent and the right to privacy. When linguists do not want informants to alter their usual style of speech, and anticipate they might do so if they know the purpose of the study, it may be defensible

- to tell them the general purpose of the research without revealing specific objectives
- to ask them to agree to be deceived at some unspecified time in the future (for instance, if there is going to be a role play)
- (if there is no alternative) to explain the research immediately after gathering the data, and ask for permission then. But if they do not give permission then, you will have to destroy the data without using it (and they may be very angry).

While deception is unacceptable, distraction is generally ethical. Distraction might involve introducing multiple activities into a study to prevent informants monitoring themselves, or asking them to tell about an event in their lives, when what you are interested in is not the story but its form. (6.5)

6. **Sponsors and users.** If your academic project is done in co-operation with an agency, group, or company in the community, you must usually provide an account of your work that is useful to the user. In turn, they must understand that you have to be evaluated on your work as an academic product, and must meet academic deadlines and standards. (7)

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