**The Impact of the Internet on the Language of Literary Discourse**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to show the impact of the Internet on the language of literary discourse by analysing a number of texts published on the Internet by Arab writers. The analysis highlights two main features: firstly, that new types of vocabulary have permeated literary texts, though modified for consistency with the genre; secondly, colloquial Arabic is increasingly deployed in literary texts in order preserve the Arabic language’s Internet presence in the face of possible marginalization, even extinction in the ongoing battle of languages.

**Key Words:** Internet, computer terminology, virtual reality, semantic field

**Introduction**

David Crystal, author of *Language and the Internet*, argues: “If the Internet represents a revolution, it is likely to be a linguistic revolution.”[[2]](#endnote-2) He states that the nature of the digital medium, and the Internet’s exponential global growth affect language generally and individual languages particularly. He also points to the immense diversity of Internet-related language. There are distinct linguistic registers for e-mails, chat groups, comments, and online literature, among others, each with its own style and characteristics. Many of Crystal’s findings apply to Arabic, yet there are few studies of the use of Arabic on the Internet, particularly with regard to literary writing.

Crystal’s study on the one hand, and a review of numerous Internet literary texts on the other, highlight the impact information technology has had on creative writing. The decision made by some writers to publish on the Web has had a clear impact on the language of literary discourse, leading to the emergence of new linguistic and stylistic features in literature: the introduction of specialized Internet and digital terminology; innovation in punctuation and the use of emojis and other graphological features; the use of the English and other loanwords; and the introduction of vernacular dialects into creative writing. This study seeks to shed light on some of these new linguistic phenomena and may constitute the basis for further detailed research.

The Internet is international, interactive, and digital. Each of these characteristics has an impact on the type of language used on it. The most fundamental impact results from the medium’s digital nature. The most obvious aspect here is the physical computer that we use to connect to the Internet, and which determines the user’s communication choices. Moreover, the nature of digital communication between sender and recipient, or sender and network itself, determines the type of language and the vocabulary used.[[3]](#endnote-3) Though the examples used by Crystal in his study are taken from the English language, his findings about the special linguistic characteristics of Internet discourse are more broadly applicable to other languages, including Arabic, since the nature of the digital medium remains the same all around the world. I will review different aspects of this issue for Arabic literary texts and examine its implications, advantages, and disadvantages.

A range of literary texts are examined in this study. The selection took gender into account by choosing texts by both male and female writers in order to present the subject from both viewpoints. Authors from a variety of Arab nationalities were also selected. Prose and poetry are both represented, as are both negative and positive author attitudes towards the Internet itself.

**New Linguistic Resources**

A major impact the Internet has had is the increased use of Web- and other computer-related language in creative writing, with some authors increasingly adopting an online-oriented lexicon and grammar, though assimilated to the existing norms of both prose and poetry. Egyptian critic Nabīl ‛Alī agrees with Crystal that these new linguistic resources are a natural result of the contemporary use of the machine in writing and other discourse, as the culture of the information age requires new forms of linguistic creativity from both its producers and consumers. Communication is increasingly conducted via machine, and human-machine interaction requires a deep understanding of the relationship between natural and artificial language, resulting in a new form of language inspired by the nature of the medium through which it is produced.[[4]](#endnote-4) ‛Alī’s hypothesis about the nature of language in the information age appears largely borne out in many of the literary texts replete with the vocabulary of the Internet published on the Web.

My analysis of words borrowed from the Internet within a number of literary texts shows that these words can be classified into three groups: the first includes terminology related to the computers and software, such as electronic windows, CD-ROM, screen, wires, mouse, programming, keyboard, metal grid; the second includes terminology related to the Internet, such as: e-mail, chat, website, electronic message, virtual reality, electronic communication, global village, Yahoo, Hotmail, Messenger, password, username, link, .com, and so on; the third includes verbs relating to the use of computers or the Internet, such as: navigate, press, click, send, download, store, chat, e-mail, among others.

Writers’ use of these as-it-were borrowed linguistic resources underlines that we cannot exclude the daily vernacular from literary language, as some used to believe. I would argue that the essence of literary language is indirect, expressing emotion through imagery and other forms of creativity. This contrasts entirely with scientific language, characterizable as descriptive and direct. One could not have imagined these two language forms one day coalescing as they have, with the former borrowing structures and terminology from the latter and seamlessly and effortlessly entering the very core of literary discourse. Moroccan poet ‛Adnān ṭah’s collection*Wa lī fīhā‛Anākibu Ukhrā* (“I Have Other Spiders”) [[5]](#endnote-6) [[6]](#endnote-7) is perhaps the best evidence of this, illustrated in the following passage from the poem “*Al-Shāshah‛Alaykum”* (“Screen Greetings”):

صباح الخير أيها العنكبوت

صباح الرضى يا زقزقة الكهرباء

أنا جاهز فخذني إلى عالمي الذي من الضوء

فلدي جيران طيبون في هوتميل

وأتراب ودودون في ياهو.

Good morning, spider

A morning of gratification to you, electric tweet

I am ready; take me to my world made of light

I have good neighbours in Hotmail

And good friends in Yahoo.

Every line contains terms related to the Internet or computers. This is also true of every poem in the anthology. These terms were not previously used in the context of poetry, but, as the subject of the poem is the Internet, the writer was obliged to do so. They read effortlessly without sounding jarring. This is, perhaps, the most salient aspect of the language of the Internet’s interpolation into literary texts, including poetry. We all know that poetic language has its own characteristics and features that make it different from that of any other kind of discourse. ‛Umar Ūgān refers to this in his book *Language and Speech*:

The language of poetry is distinguished from any other language by being a ‘displaced’ language. Poetry is distinct from prose by being ‘displaced’ from standard language, and this standard is not present in regular language, but in scientific language.[[7]](#endnote-10)

Thus, poetic language is one of ‘displacement’ with multiple semiotic and symbolic dimensions. It is far from the descriptive language of science with one clear and approved denotations. Given that we cannot do without the linguistic resources that information technology has decisively introduced into all aspects of our lives and, given the rigidly scientific language from which it originates, poets need to adapt it to suit the language of poetry. This process has reached its zenith in the blend of the scientific language of the Internet and rhetoric. Poets have started to create metaphors, similes, other imagery and stylistic features from the strictly scientific language of the Internet. This has seamlessly infused with poetry without affecting the beauty of the latter’s language or sense of “displacement.”

In the poem “*Waḥīdan Ah̟furu fī Jalīdin ḥayy”* (“Alone, I Carve Into Living Ice”) from the same collection, ṭahwrites:

أكتب عن الشعر في الزمن الافتراضي

وعن الحب في عصر الذكاء الاصطناعي

وعن مواعيدي الغريرة

في حدائق الإنترنت

ضيعتني الإنترنت

بددت دفئي الباقي

ولم أجن منها سوى الوحدة

والقلق

فأصدقائي تائهون

في سوق المضاربات الغرامية

منهمكون في كتابة الرسائل العابرة للقلوب

والقارات

يعرضون حرارتهم الفصيحة

ولواعجهم المترجمة

على ماكينات النوافذ الإلكترونية القارسة.

I write about poetry in the virtual era

about love in an age of artificial intelligence

about my reckless appointments

in the gardens of the Internet.

I was lost in the Internet.

I wasted the remainder of my warmth

and found only loneliness and anxiety.

My friends are wandering

in the speculator market of love

engaged in writing messages  
that cross hearts and continents,

offering their eloquent warmth

their converted ardent love

on the windows of a frigid electronic machine.

The narrator uses more than one image here to try to describe his condition after becoming addicted to the Internet. He says that he made romantic appointments on Internet dating sites, which he described figuratively as “gardens” in which lovers can meet, but these only make him anxious and lonely, like his friends who trawl sex and romance websites and correspond internationally: a metaphor for e-mail messages sent through cold websites. Through this metaphor, the poet wants to say that, although the Internet has created opportunities for young people to express their passions, it remains coldly unreal.

Among other collections in which this phenomenon is apparent is *Taghrīd aṭ-ṭā’ir al-‛ālī* (“The Song of the Automated Bird”) by Aḥmad Faḍil Shablūl, a substantial part of which was published on the WATA website’s forums in 2007.[[8]](#endnote-12) The collection is full of computer- and Internet-related terminology and includes eighteen works in which the poet endeavours to anthropomorphize the machine. He treats the computer like a human being with feelings, sensations, hopes, desires, and spirit:

حبس الشاعر فوق نوافذه

أرسل كل أوامره

للحاسوب

ارتجف الحاسوب وقال:

يا ألطاف الله

كيف أجيء إليك من الآفاق تعيسا

وأكحل شاشاتي

بدموع ملفاتي

لطفا يا الله

فغبار الأوهام

يفتت كل خلاياي الضوئية

آه

روحي لا تسمو لخيال الشعراء

أدركني بزجاجة ماء.

He captured the poet over his windows

sending all his orders

to the computer.

The computer shuddered and said:

O merciful God

How can I come to you, disheartened and from distant land?

I eye-line my screens

with the tears of my files

O Merciful God

the dust of fantasies

has shattered my optical cells

Ah

my soul does not ascend to the fantasies of poets

pass me a bottle of water

The computer admits defeat in the face of human capabilities. It trembles because it cannot compete with its owner’s imagination and vision. Whatever its computing power, it cannot attain the spiritual heights required to match poetic fantasy. It faces up to failure and destruction, since its memory could be erased at any moment, and so, feeling miserable, asks for water.

In “*A‛tāb min Sawālib al-Aslāk”* (“Reprimands from the Negative Wires”) from the same collection, Shablūl writes:

منحتها السرور والغضب

وهبتها الذكريات

سألتها

تخزين كل لحظة

تمر بالشموس والنفوس

تسجل أجمل الثواني

وأضخم المعاني

وأروع الأغاني

فعاتبت

سوالب الأسلاك عاتبت

تراجعت

وأصبحت حديدا

آه من الحديد عندما يخون

تبرمجت

تحولت جليدا

الكمبيوتر الذي علمته الحنان والأمان

خانني

لأني أدخلت في اللغات والشرائح الممغنطة

عواطف الأزهار والأشجار والأنهار

ورقصة الأغصان والأحلام والمطر.

I gave her joy and anger

offered her my memoirs

and asked her

to store every moment

that passes by the spirits or the stars

to record the most beautiful instants

that which is most significant

the impressive songs

and I reprimanded

the negative wires, I reprimanded

I retreated

and became like iron

Ah... when iron betrays

I was programmed

and turned into ice

the computer that I taught compassion and safety

betrayed me

because I was converted into languages and magnetized chips;

passions of trees, rivers and flowers,

a dance of branches, dreams and rain.

The poet treats the computer as an unfaithful companion. He entrusts it with all of his memories, both beautiful and sad. When he asks it to reveal them, it betrays him because it is not human, but liable to break down. As in other poems in the collection, the poet uses IT-related terminology (like magnetic chips, wire, computer, programmed, and storage), strips them of their scientific meaning, and weaves them into the poem’s fabric in an expressive and natural way.

In the poem “*Min ‛Alyā’ al-Internet”* (“From the Heights of the Internet”) he writes:

كنت أسير مع الشمس

وفي جمجمتي قرص صلب

يتمايل مثل الأشجار

إذا مرت تحت الأغصان

امرأة من ريحان.

I was walking with the sun

with a hard drive in my skull

swaying like trees,

if I walked under the branches,

a basil woman passed.

Here the poet uses “hard drive” as a metaphor for the mind, which in the far-off future is imagined functioning like a computer.

In Syrian poet Juliette Badir’s “*Muḥ**ādathah ‛alā al-Massinger”* (“Conversation on Messenger”) published on the Alif for Freedom of Expression in Writing and Human Life website in 2007, she writes:

لما دخلت فلم أجد لك أحرفا

في جعبة الإيميل صحتُ مرددا

هل هاجرتْ عصفورةُ الصُّبح التي

كانت تلوِّن من شذاها الموعدا

تتابع التواصل إلكترونيا

بكل رومانسية

صدق

جمال

شاعرية.

When I entered, I did not find word from you

in the e-mail folder, I repeatedly shouted:

Did the morning bird migrate?  
she coloured my rendezvous with her fragrance

and her continuous digital connection

with romance

truth

beauty

and poetry[[9]](#endnote-14)

The poet used the word “folder” coupled with “e-mail” to form an Internet-related metaphor. The use of the Arabic definite article with the foreign loanword “e-mail” shows how the poet uses the language of the Internet spontaneously, yet with an Arabic flavour, as well as the extent of adaptation of this language within the text. It also demonstrates the overwhelming impact of the language of the Internet on creative thinking when the subject at hand is itself the Internet.

The language of the Internet has also influenced love poetry. Classical Arab poets flirted with their sweethearts by describing their physical traits, while the poets of the Internet flirt with their virtual sweethearts through the language of the Web. In a collection entitled *Tamazzuqāt ‛Ishq Raqmī* (“Ruptures in a Digital Love,”) substantial sections of which he posted on the *Forum of the Arab Story* website in 2009, Moroccan poet ‛Abd-al-Nūr Idrīs wrote several digital love poems from the virtual world. Consider the following passage from the poem “*Imra’a min Silikūn*” (“The Silicone Woman”):

"يأتيني المساء مشنوقا  
تركَبُني حاسة السفرحبلى بالضوء  
يمتطيني الصِّفرمحمولا بالدعوات  
يمتشقني الواحد المعتّقعلى جبينا لماء  
أراك متسربلة بقفطان عرسنا السيليكوني  
تتأوّدين لوني السلطاني في العناق  
وخصركِ تثنّى ...  
مننظرتي المُتيّمة في أضواء النيلون  
والشاشة الفضية تعكس مشيتك القَطاةْ  
وقارئة الفنجان تراقص بعضها  
وتكتب لي عقوصا من الرقم  
وتخط نقوشا تشفيني منكِ  
فكنت لي كأس نبيذ  
وسيفا يرشقني أنا المتدثر بالورق....

................................................  
وكنتِ لي مدينة الظل  
تمزق جسدها كلّما ذراني غبار النت في انفعالات الغمام  
وكنت أنتِ امرأة تستحضرها ابتهالات فأرتي المرقّطة  
وكنتِ خدعة بصرية  
وكنتِ لي معبودة من سيليكون..

The evening comes to me hanged

The sense of traveling hunts me, pregnant with light

The Zero drives me, loaded with prayer

The aged One lashes me on the forehead of water

I see you dressed in our silicone wedding garment

twisting in my royal colour when embraced

Bending your waist….

From my captivated regard in the nylon lights

the silver screen reflects your sand grouse walk

The cup reader dances alone,

writes a braid of numbers for me,

and draws an inscription to cure me of you.

You were for me like a glass of wine

a sword that strikes me, wrapped in paper

……..

You were the town of shade for me

tearing her body whenever the dust of the net covered me in cloudy emotions.

You were a woman invoked by the prayers of my speckled mouse

a visual trick

and a silicone goddess for me[[10]](#endnote-16)

This passage depicts the female body beginning to form through the immersion of the poet in the Internet’s light waves. This is reflected in the allusion to the numbers zero and one that form the basis for digital programming. Visual illusions appear before him via a click of the mouse, through which he produces the image of a silicone woman that matches his desires. The poet is conjuring up a virtual Scheherazade, using expressions related to the Internet lexicon like: “silver screen,” “nylon lights,” “dust of the net,” “prayers of the mouse,” and “visual tricks.” Thus, the poet flirts with his sweetheart through a innovative style of love poetry drawing on Internet references.

In this context, the broadening of lexical denotation is a new and significant phenomenon. Many words have taken on new meanings with the advent of the Internet. Take, for example, the change in meaning of the word “window” in the following passage from ‛Abbūd Jabārī’s poem *“‛Alā Mashārif at-Ta’wīl”* (“On the Outskirts of Interpretation”):

الستارة السميكة

والزجاج المظلل

والشبك المعدني

كيف إذن سأفتح على العالم نافذتي

وأمد رأسي

كيف سأومئ للعابرين

وأصطاد فراشة شاردة

كيف سيرى جاري

جلبة الأضواء في بيتي

كيف سيعرف أني ما زلت في الحياة

كيف سأعرف وجهي خلل هذه النافذة

بل كيف سأسرق باقة الضوء

من قمر سلبته النوافذ تاريخه

وإذا مت

فكيف لروحي أن تصعد إلى بارئها.

Thick screen

Shaded glass

Metal grid

How will I open my window to the world

How will I extend my head

How will I signal to passers-by

and hunt an errant butterfly.

How will my neighbour see

the fanfare of lights in my house.

How will he know that I’m still alive.

How will I know my face through this window.

How will I steal a bouquet of light

from a moon whose past was stolen by the windows.

If I die,

how will my soul ascend to its creator.[[11]](#endnote-18)

The word “window” has an established, familiar meaning, but, since the IT revolution, it has gained a new sense. The reader must understand the new sense in order to interpret the poem correctly. The word “window” here refers to the computer feature, unlike a traditional window that allows the narrator to see the moon, sunlight, butterflies, to communicate with his neighbours, and so on. While the “window” here opens the whole world up to him, he remains isolated to the point where no one would know if he died, leaving his spirit unable to meet its creator. It seems to be a window both open and closed at the same time.

In *“Al-Shāshah ‛Alaykum”* (Screen Greetings),” ṭah writes:

سأحمل روحي على فأرتي

وألقي بها في مهاوي الكوكيز

I will carry my soul on my mouse

I will throw it into the cookies’ chasms

The word “mouse” here refers to a computer peripheral with which the poet has associated his destiny, indicating the dominance of virtual over true reality in our lives. This expansion in the denotation of words is a form of language evolution arising out of its interaction with wider social and cultural change. Importantly, this requires an update to modern dictionaries that should be carried out by Arabic language academies in order to allow the language to better respond to the requirements of our time.

We may conclude from examples above that the language of the Internet has greatly affected the language of literary discourse. In fact, Arab writers, whether consciously or not, have carried out the recommendations of the editors of *Wired Style* who recommended the use of the language of our time in creative writing, provided that it is allowed new denotations and usage in order to avoid the rigidly technological:

Transcend the technical: Jargon gets a bad rap among literary types. As a pejorative catchall for plain lack of eloquence, jargon is often equated with pretentious technical terms stuck where they don’t belong, with highfalutin words calling attention to themselves when a single syllable would do, with strings of noun clusters and prepositional phrases that gum up a sentence like spilled Jolt on a keyboard.[[12]](#endnote-20)

This is exactly what we see in contemporary, web-based literature. Despite the chasm between the rigid language of technology and the dynamic language of literature, contemporary writers have been able to reconcile the two and draw a new vocabulary from the world of technology which they can recast in new forms to create new imagery. This underlines that literature cannot be isolated from reality, but rather flows from its essence and expresses it in a literary style that make it different from other forms of expression.

**Rich Graphological Tools**

According to Crystal, what makes the language of the Internet distinctive is its graphological richness facilitating a wide variety of colours, through punctuation and other graphological tools that constitute a palette of expression far exceeding the options available to writers of traditional texts. For example, different ways of speaking and different emotions can be expressed by repeating letters or by using punctuation marks, such as in “Ahhhhhh, what are you saying????? Are you crazy!!!!!” Putting spaces between letters (cutting words) can be used to express a higher pitch, such as: “l i s t e n t o m e.”[[13]](#endnote-22) This derives from the rich graphological capacity of the keyboard that enables with the push of a button, and offers different possibilities to the pen.[[14]](#endnote-23) Furthermore, the keyboard allows writers to express their emotions, lend emphasis, and add tone in innovative ways. Like others elsewhere, Arab poets have taken advantage of this in the service of meaning. “Chat” by Moroccan poet Idrīs ‛Abd-al-Nūr is a good example. [[15]](#endnote-25) [[16]](#endnote-26) The poem’s presents itself in a style that resembles chatroom talk, with the poet interpolating icons and other graphological symbols into the poem, and repeating letters in certain words in order to create the impression of chatroom discourse. The poem’s use of icons such as @, ♥, ←, and ∏ leaves the readers in no doubt that the poet has used a keyboard rather than a traditional pen. The graphological richness of the poem holds the reader’s attention immediately. The use of a keyboard has led us to writing words as we hear them, not as dictated by the traditional rules of script. Writers have started to compensate for our tongues and ears by using hands and eyes in conjunction with the keyboard. This is influenced by how people communicate in chatrooms, where dialogue is written rather than verbal.

In summary, we can say that writers have exploited the possibilities of the keyboard in order to deliver better texts, with graphological richness that emulates the emotional, emphatic, and symbolic possibilities of the voice. This phenomenon has taken off in recent years with the transition from tapping a computer keyboard to tapping a mobile phone or smart device screens, with social media network tools like Viber and WhatsApp providing an abundance of icons able to abbreviate phrases, sentences, or even entire paragraphs. Deploying these icons communicatively is considered a basic digital literacy skill today, meaning that school teachers must take it into consideration from an early stage in the teaching life-cycle in order to raise a new digitally enlightened generation.[[17]](#endnote-29)

**Use of the English Language**

One of the most important changes in recent times is the proliferation of English language borrowings by intellectuals and others of all ages within non-native English speaking communities. Due to the development of the Internet as a quick and easy means of accessing information, it is natural for English to interpolate itself into other languages since it is the Internet’s principal linguistic medium. The Internet is American in origin, originally using only English, but, as it developed into a global phenomenon, other languages began to find space on it too. Nonetheless, English remains its most commonly used language.[[18]](#endnote-30)

A significant number of intellectuals predict English will come to dominate the whole world due to globalization, a principal objective of which is the globalization of language. Muwaffaq Zāzawī, in his article *“Globalization and the Arabic Language,”* argues:

If globalization means universality – turning the world into “one village” through the domination of the culture of the developed world, represented by the United States of America, over the rest of the world, and the transition from local to global – it can be said that the English language moved from local to global in order to become the language spoken by the whole world despite the use of various native languages. There is no doubt that this is true and clear of the English language.[[19]](#endnote-31)

Barbara Wallraff believes that one of the main reasons English is qualified to become a universal language more than other languages is the fact that it forms the largest proportion of material circulated via the Internet.[[20]](#endnote-32)

Thus, Arab navigators of the Internet find themselves faced with a seemingly overwhelming torrent of English, forcing them to choose from three options: to translate English terms into Arabic, to Arabize them, or to accept them as loan words. Experts have undoubtedly made significant efforts to Arabize computer Internet terminology, such as the creation of special lexicons like *The Comprehensive Dictionary of Computer Terms*.[[21]](#endnote-33) Our concern here is how to deal with foreign words in literary texts. Analysis of a large number of literary texts shows that Arab writers see no harm in accepting the third option above, something troubling in its ideological ramifications. The Jordanian critic Brīhān Qumuq has called this phenomenon “Arabliziyah,” alluding to the use of English language vocabulary by rendering it in Arabic script without translation or quotation marks, such that it seems part of the vernacular. She comments:

This distorted language – if I may use the term language – was unfortunately used before we had the World Wide Web or the Internet, but differently. It was used in homes, universities, streets, shops, addresses of investment companies, everywhere. This is an example of the deformation and civilizational poverty of the Arab World. In realistic, not pessimistic, terms, it is simply (and without simplifying) the expression of the shattering of the nation within us, and our shattering within the nation.[[22]](#endnote-34)

Some examples will serve to illustrate this point. Saudi author Rajā’ al-ṣāni’s novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (“The Girls of Riyadh”) draws on the norms of electronic messages. She uses not only English terminology fundamental to the e-mail form, but also includes many other English phrases and terms transliterated into Arabic so as to appear natural to the reader. She uses English spontaneously in dialogue between characters that browse the Internet for hours, such as: “He told her once that he dreamed of marrying a girl that would be his best friend.” Here she writes “best friend” in Arabic characters and adds the definite article “*al-*” instead of “the” to produce “*al-best*.” In the sentence “I did not expect all this interaction with my e-mails,” she adds the first person pronoun *ya’* (ي) to the loan word “e-mail” inflected with the plural suffix “-āt” (ات): *īmaylātī* (ايميلاتي). Al-Ṣāni also puts English expressions into her characters’ mouths like “emotionally intelligent.” The use of English in this way prompts the conclusion that either it is more convenient for the author, or that she expects the reader to be used to English and hence to not find it difficult to understand or see anything odd in its use. Here are some other examples in which authors use English (underlined for reference) within text, but in Arabic script:

They have no idea what is going on out there.

By God, that it is attractive.

Actually, I like it.

I went and saw security for myself, so no one could enter.

These phrases were not spoken by foreigners but Saudi girls, indicating the hegemony of foreign culture over a new generation that attributes prestige to the use of English.

The strangest phenomenon is the infiltration of the original discourse of the Internet into poetry, as is shown in the following from the already-cited poem “Screen Greetings”:

”غود مورننج بيتر

.................

سأحمل روحي على فأرتي

وألقي بها في مهاوي *الكوكيز*

.................

أما أنا فلا خارج لي

الويب والواب والنتسكايب تعرفني"

“Good Morning Peter

…………….

I will carry my soul on my mouse

I will throw it into the cookies’ chasms

*……………*

But I have no outlet

The web and WAP and Netscape know me

In the poem “Elegy to Maldo Diallo,” we find:

”حيث الموظفات النشيطات

يرتدين بدلا كلاسيكية أنيقة

وأحذية رياضية سميكة

حيث البدينات يأكلن *الهوت دوغز*

ولا يتجشأن"

The active employees

are wearing elegant classic costumes

and thick sport shoes

while the obese eat hotdogs

and do not burp

In the poem “I Love You,” the narrator includes the e-mail addresses of some of his friends:

".........أن يعرف Christian@yahoo.fr

و jamal@maktoob.com

و dai-ping@nirvanet.net

وعناوين إلكترونية أخرى

كل تفاصيل حياتك

..............

أن تحب عشيقة حمراء

تفوح منها روائح فيليب موريس

عشيقة بكعب خبير

في سحق أعقاب المارلبورو لايت"

…if Christian@yahoo.fr,

jamal@maktoob.com,

dai-ping@nirvanet.net

and other electronic addresses

know all the details of your life

…………

To adore a red mistress

who smells of Philip Morris

A mistress with a heel

Expert in crushing Marlboro Light butts

The use of the English language is a widespread phenomenon, not just in Arabic. In an article originally published in the *Haaretz* newspaper, Tamara Traubman suggests that Israelis have begun to worry about the fate of their language, because the status of English as a universal language has led to the undermining of Hebrew in their country. The supremacy of the English language does not just mean that everyone speaks English, but that they also think in it.[[23]](#endnote-35) Traubman’s concern for the Hebrew language mirrors that of many Arab and other intellectuals internationally towards their own. This infiltration may pose a fundamental threat to national languages, and information technology in general and the Internet in particular may put an end to cultural diversity based on language diversity. Language is the receptacle for culture and thought and the means through which cultural heritage is transmitted and preserved. Words bear many features of any culture the arise out of. The spread of the English language outside of its national borders, therefore, is an element in the spread of the concepts, the perceptions, and also the values of the culture behind it, subjugating cultures that accept such infiltration.[[24]](#endnote-36)

It is true that the Arabic language is both flexible and sophisticated, and these attributes have allowed it to keep up-to-date and to embrace new terms. However, excessive borrowing from other cultures and the removal of barriers between the native and foreign languages is troubling, with serious sociocultural consequences. Iraqi critic Aḥmad Muḥammad Ma’tūq points out in “*The Theory of the Third Language*” that normal and measured borrowing from foreign languages is an important source of growth and enrichment for languages and civilizations past and present.[[25]](#endnote-38)

Thus, the introduction of foreign words is neither a new invention nor a threat to be feared, if the users of the language approach it circumspectly. However, the call to throw the doors open and import terms into Arabic at all levels does not mean accepting that half of the language must become borrowed. There are many advantages to borrowing, but there are also drawbacks, such as: loss of the expressive value of Arabic forms; modification of Arabic phonological structures through the introduction of strange sounds; lexicographical confusion; difficulties in adjusting for inflection; and violation of Arabic morphological rules. We must therefore act with great caution in this regard. We must allow foreign words, structures and idiomatic expressions to enter as they are or with minor changes according to parameters set by linguistic experts and public preference. [[26]](#endnote-40) [[27]](#endnote-41)

We can, therefore, say that the infiltration of English into literary texts is not only a danger to the language, but that it has more serious intellectual and cultural consequences. The domination of one language over another is a form of cultural invasion that must be addressed, especially at a time when the most important aspects of national identity, of which language is an essential component, have begun to fade.

**Writing in Dialect**

Every language in the world has a range of levels. There is the language used in the religious texts, in the media, in science, literature, and in the common vernacular, and so on. The question here is to which level does the language of the Internet belong? According to Crystal, the language of the Internet is a mixture of different linguistic levels or layers, foremost of which is the language used in the vernacular. He, therefore, calls it “written speech.”[[28]](#endnote-42) While there is no comprehensive study of the Arabic linguistic landscape on the Internet, it is plain that the vernacular occupies a considerable space, especially on non-official sites. Our question, then, is to what extent the dialect has infiltrated into literary texts.

The use of colloquial dialect alongside the classical language is well-known already in both Arabic prosody and poetry. However, this has been limited to certain expressions that served the particular context, especially in dialogue. The publication of literary works on the Internet, however, appears to have further exacerbated this phenomenon to the point where we are beginning to find specialized sites on the web that publish novels, stories and poems written entirely in colloquial Arabic. These sites also have a actively engaged readership. Take, for example, the site *‛Alam al-Imārāt*, on which we find complete novels in colloquial dialect. Some of these texts have a very large readership, which underlines the extent of the market for such works. Just as some of these sites specialize in publishing works of literary prose in colloquial Arabic, other sites specialize in publishing vernacular poetry. The website *Abyāt* (“Verses”), for example, specializes in publishing poets from the Arab Gulf writing in their various regional dialects.

Personal blogs have also contributed to the spread of writing in colloquial Arabic. It is worth mentioning here the novel *‛Ayiza Atjawwaz* (“I Want To Get Married”),[[29]](#endnote-44) by the young Egyptian writer Ghāda ‛Abd-al-‛Āl, who first posted chapters of the novel on her personal blog in Egyptian dialect. When she found that the novel was well received, she published it in hard copy, prompting a media frenzy.

The reasons that impel writers to publish in colloquial dialects on the Internet differs from those who do so in hard copy. In the view of Emirati critic Fāṭima al-Brīkī, the reason for the spread of colloquial Arabic on the Internet relates to the age profile of most Internet users in the Arab world. They are typically young people and not necessarily good writers. They are familiar with the language of text messages, TV screen captions, and the language of chatrooms, all of which are predominantly in colloquial Arabic. They have been trained to read and enjoy these kinds of texts, creating the necessary environment for the greater emergence of texts written in colloquial Arabic. These young people are mainly novice Internet users, and it is easier for them to write for their audience in colloquial Arabic.[[30]](#endnote-45) In an article entitled *“Language and the Internet,”* Nādhim al-Sayyid argues that the keyboard has turned everyone into a writer. The printed word used to belong to professional writers and the like in the past. Today, anyone who owns a computer can consider themselves a writer. And since these writers are largely unconcerned with the fate of the language, they do not care about the type of language they use, as long as they are able to communicate their ideas to a wide range of readers.[[31]](#endnote-47)

Another reason for the spread of colloquial language on the Web is the need to maintain the Internet presence of Arabic by any means necessary, since it is under threat from various foreign languages. Aḥmad Zayn, coordinator of the “Creators’ Club,” a part of the website *Islam Online*, wrote the following on the underlying reason for opening a section entitled “Colloquial Poetry”:

We used to have many fears about ‘colloquial language’ in general and in its introduction into the Creators’ Club. However, after much discussion, the working group decided to include such texts. This was because we felt that the conflict is no longer between ‘classical language’ and ‘vernacular.’ Unfortunately, it has become a conflict between the Arabic language in all its forms on the one hand, and foreign languages on the other.[[32]](#endnote-50)

Following on from this, it can be said that fear of the extinction of the Arabic language due to the growing hegemony of other languages is one of the main reasons for the growth in the Arabic vernacular across the Internet, whether on literary or non-literary sites.

This is also linked to the idea of “the death of languages,” which has become a source of concern for many intellectuals who care about the fate of languages on the Internet, which has come to be called a “language cemetery.” The Internet is linked to globalization, as already noted, and globalization is, in turn, allied to the political and economic dominance of major powers that impose their languages, directly or indirectly, on underdeveloped countries. This means the decline of certain languages in favour of others. In *Challenges of the Information Age*, Nabīl ‛Alī presents statistics that half of the world’s 6,000 languages are threatened with extinction, with one dying currently every two weeks.[[33]](#endnote-53) The Internet offers a grim prospect for linguistic diversity. Only 500 of the world’s 6,000 languages are represented on the Internet, and most of those barely so. This situation points to a “language gap” between the developed and developing worlds, with the latter seemingly unable to defend their languages in the fierce linguistic battle that is the Internet.[[34]](#endnote-54) Thus, fears about the extinction of the Arabic language, like the languages of underdeveloped countries, drives many to write in colloquial dialect in order to ensure a place for Arabic in all its varieties on the Internet, so as not to allow other languages to dominate or replace it.

Thus, we see there are several reasons why writers use colloquial dialects on the Internet. The important questions in this regard are: will colloquial language one day dominate what is written on the Web, in Arabic with the classical language becoming the marginalized preserve of a minority? And does the threat of the disappearance of the classical language on the Internet actually lend legitimacy to the use of the colloquial?

It is difficult to give immediate answers to these questions without more in-depth studies. However, we should be alert to this worrying and confusing trend in literature, because the marginalization of the classical language has religious, social and national implications for Arabs, since Arabic is the language of Qur’an that unifies the Arab peoples. This means that classical Arabic in particular, rather than the Arabic language in general, faces serious challenges in the fierce battle of languages.

**Conclusion**

Having dealt with the impact of the Internet on literary discourse from various perspectives, two key aspects becomes clear: one positive, the other negative.

The positive aspect is apparent through the new vocabulary that has permeated into literary texts. The Internet has given new resources to literature, derived from its lexicon, as well as from IT-related vocabulary more broadly. Writers have not merely used these resources as they found them, but have started to adapt them to make them consistent with the language of literature. They have reshaped these terms and created new artistic and rhetorical imagery. This has broadened the significance of many lexical items, with many gaining new meanings. All of this shows the flexibility of Arabic and its adaptability to the times. In addition, we have seen that the use of the keyboard in writing has expanded the use of punctuation and other graphological features, also adding new expressive possibilities. It is now possible to use the repetition of characters resulting from pressing keys to express the emotions, emphases and intonations of oral speech, because the writer can now circulate their texts themselves, something previously the sole domain of publishing houses.

The negative aspect of this influence is in two key areas. The first is the infiltration of the English language into literary texts without pretext other than enforcing the hegemony of the English language on the Internet. Where this infiltration exceeds a natural rate of borrowing it becomes a form of cultural invasion, which many nations are trying to fight in order to defend their cultural specificity, heritage, and civilization, as reflected in their language above all. There is serious danger here, and the phenomenon must be carefully monitored and handled by experts, including those interested in Arabic teaching, especially in schools and universities, in order to curb its undue spread among the young .The hegemony of English is a function of globalization, and the cultural invasion it entails has provoked resistance. The second disturbing phenomenon is the resort to colloquial Arabic in literary writing through specialized platforms that encourage the phenomenon and lend it legitimacy. This paves the way for the various Arabic dialects to become alternatives to classical Arabic, which, in addition to its sanctity as the language of the Qur’an, is the most important common denominator of the Arab peoples. Its extinction would represent the destruction of the most important link that unifies Arabs intellectually, religiously, culturally and socially.

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2. *Internet***Endnotes**

   1Crystal, David, *Language and the Internet*, p.8 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 2‛Alī, Nabīl, *Arab Culture and the Information Age: A Vision of the Future of Arab Cultural Discourse*, p. 276. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 3 The collection can be downloaded at: aslimnet.free.fr/ress/t\_adnane/index.htm [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. The Internet is sometimes referred to in Arabic as “The spider’s web.” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. 44Ūgān,‛Umar, *Language and Speech*, p. 233. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
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13. Crystal, David, *Language and the Internet,* p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
14. Crystal, David, *Language and the Internet*, p.39. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
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17. Milḥim, Ibrahīm, “Digitization and the Transformation of Writing,” p.85. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
18. Crystal, David. *Language and the Internet*, pp. 269-270. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
19. Zāzawī, Muwaffaq, “Globalization and the Arabic Language,”12 September 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
20. Wallraff, Barbara. *What Global Language?* p. 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
21. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
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27. Ma‛tūq, Aḥmad Muḥammad. *The Theory of the Third Language: A Study in al-Wusṭā Arabic*, pp. 163-168. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
28. Crystal, David, *Language and the Internet*, p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
29. The novel can be downloaded at: http://download-story-pdf-ebooks.com/5648-free-book. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
30. Al-Brīkī, Fāṭima, “The Spoken Dialect Invades Internet Sites,” 23 September 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
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32. Zayn, Aḥmad, “Poetry in Dialect,” 6 February 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
33. ‛Alī, Nabīl, *Challenges of the Information Age*, p57. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
34. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)