

## **The Use of Kurdification and Code-switching in SMS Texting by Kurdish Undergraduate Students at the University of Sulaimani**

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### الملخص

نتج عن ظهور التكنولوجيا ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي سهولة غير مسبوقه في التواصل ، وخاصة شكل التواصل المكتوب ؛ بطرق غير واضحة الحدود بين الأمم واللغات. ومع ذلك ، يرافق هذا السهولة بعض التغييرات في بنية الكتابة وعلامات الترقيم والأهم من ذلك اللغة المستخدمة في التواصل. يعد تبديل الشفرة ، المعزف على نطاق واسع على أنه يتناوب بين لغتين أو أكثر في التبادل ، ظاهرة لغوية تجذب الكثير من الاهتمام في الوقت الحالي. يدعي هذا البحث أنه على الرغم من انتشار رمز الكود على نطاق واسع بين عمليات تبادل الرسائل القصيرة للطلاب الأكراد في جامعة السليمانية ، إلا أن الطلاب يستخدمون نوعًا جديدًا خاصًا من اللغة ، يطلق عليه الباحثون "الأكراد". تم جمع عينات من تبادل الرسائل النصية القصيرة للطلاب على مدى ٨ أشهر من طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة السليمانية لقياس معدل وتكرار وطبيعة تبديل الشفرة في الرسائل النصية المتنقلة ، إلى جانب محاولة الإشارة إلى كيفية قيام كلا خاصية متنقلة والنص الروماني يتفاعلان وينتج عنه إنتاج الأكراد. ووجد البحث أن استخدام تشفير الكود يتم جنبًا إلى جنب مع الأكراد وأن تبديل الكود مرتبط بمناسبات اجتماعية لغوية معينة. وخلص البحث إلى أنه على الرغم من أن معدل الأكراد أعلى من تبديل الكود ، إلا أنه لم يتم تطويره بالكامل كوسيلة بديلة للكتابة.

### Abstract

The advent of technology and social media resulted in an unprecedented ease in communication, especially the written form of communication, in ways that blurred the borders between nations and languages. This ease, however, is accompanied by certain technical limitations that resulted in changes in the structure of writing, punctuations and more importantly the language used for the communication. This research argues that code-switching is widespread among Kurdish students' SMS exchanges at the University of Sulaimani, and tries to find out whether this mixed-type of code together with the technical limitations results in a special types of language, or 'Kurdification', as it is the case in other languages, like Arabic. Samples of students' SMS exchanges is collected over a period of 8 months from the students of the English Department, University of Sulaimani to measure the rate, frequency, and nature of code-switching in mobile text messaging, besides trying to indicate how both of the mobile property and the Roman script interact and result in producing Kurdification. The research found that codeswitching is used hand in hand with Kurdification and that code-switching is bound to certain special sociolinguistic occasions. The research concluded that though the rate of Kurdification is higher than code-switching, however, it is not fully developed as an alternative way of writing.

## 1. Introduction

The Short Message Service (SMS) was introduced within the mobile phone in the early 1990s and it soon became popular (Crystal 2001). In Iraq, namely Kurdistan Region, mobile phones have been a popular device by the end of 2003, especially among the young generation.

SMS brought about a new mode of communication due to the immediate consequences it has on the form of the language used. SMS combines properties of writing and speech not only on the level of language form but also on the level of the audience or the recipients (Crystal, 2001). Moreover, technical restrictions, like the limit of characters to 160, or 65 Arabic or Kurdish, characters per message have led to using acronyms and abbreviations which consequently affect the orthography of the language used (Ibid). Consequently, a new form of language emerged that is an adaptation of the users' language and the Roman script. This resulted in concerns about the use and the status of native languages; many believe that English language will become predominant and may result in weakening the status of Kurdish as a native language. Moreover, with the advent of technology, code switching has become a norm in-writing, especially by students who have some backgrounds in English (Castells et al. 2006; Kung 2004; Sue 2003).

In this paper, the term 'code-switching' is used to refer to any alternation between Kurdish and English, and the term 'Kurdification' is used to refer to all the adaptations of the Kurdish language and the Roman script. The research tries to answer whether the rate and frequency of code-switching is dominant over the use of Kurdish; how the Roman script is utilized in text messages; and finally, how all these affect the Kurdish language. The study hypothesizes that code-switching is a dominant feature of Kurdish student's SMS exchanges besides Kurdification. The research aims at investigating the adaptation of the Kurdish language with the Roman Script, and analyzes the occasions and reasons behind using code-switches by Kurdish students. Such type of investigation, especially on Kurdish University students is very rare, hence the literature review relies more on other languages, such as Arabic as a neighboring language in the region .

## 2. Literature Review

Many researchers found that code-switching is a widespread phenomenon in SMS writing, especially by teenagers. In a survey conducted among students at the Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE, Peel (2004) investigates the use of English and Arabic in online communication. The study concludes that students' use of English via internet was closely related to their purposes. For example, English is mainly used when surfing for study purposes but when accessing the net for leisure students switched back to using Arabic. Peel states "Interaction is predominantly within one's language/cultural framework, irrespective of the language repertoire that one possesses." (P. 89). Zawaydeh (2007), however, thinks that the advent of technology results in a new form of language, called Romanized Arabic or Arabizi. She defines Arabizi as an "in-group" Language especially used by the younger generation consisting of spelling Arabic words in Roman letters. The language is characterized by using Latin script and numbers as letters to represent Arabic sounds that do not occur in English (cf. Bianchi, 2012). This special type of language emerged as a consequence of introducing new technologies, like the internet, mobile phones and chat applications to non- English language users, like Arabs. She purports that having no access to an Arabic keyboard compelled the users to improvise a new language code to facilitate communication. The language is characterized by inconsistent Romanization, mixed coding (sometimes between more than two languages, or scripts or dialects), loose linguistic boundaries and inconsistent use of punctuations.

Using a descriptive and analytic approach, Mustafa (2011) examines code-switching in a corpus of 1500 text messages sent by (150) teenagers at both private and public Jordanian schools trying to pin down the main reasons behind switching either to English or Arabic while texting. She found that code switching is dominant; students often use a lot of English acronyms and abbreviations as well as a Romanized version of Jordanian Colloquial Arabic (Arabizi). Mustafa states that 'economy, [jzsb.univsul.edu.iq](http://jzsb.univsul.edu.iq)

euphemism, and prestige' are among the main reasons for switching from Arabic to English while unfamiliarity with Arabic, the lack of academic, scientific and technical terms are secondary reasons. He adds that the student's ability to use abbreviations and acronyms and the attractiveness of English language are also among the contributing factors. She states that 'a very high percentage of teenagers switch to Arabizi because of the 160 characters limit when using the English alphabet, [a] tendency of creating a whole new language to save money' (p.110). She also claims that teenagers have positive attitudes towards switching to English to show off their language competencies and because they think of English as a factor for achieving a higher socioeconomic status. Other contributing factors, to her, are maintaining language competencies and the simplicity of the language. She concluded that the environment of the student, his/ her friends and the type of education the student receive, affect the frequency and the type of switching. Moreover gender also play a role, as she noticed that females tend to code switch more than males. Mustafa further explains that student's use of English and code switching does not pose a threat to the Arabic language as the extensive use of English does not reflect any affiliations or loyalty to the language.

Moreover, Bianchi, (2012) claims that online context helps in creating 'Arabizi'. Bianchi found out that Arabizi has special uses which are different from the use of Arabic and English. For example, Arabizi is more found in chats related to family and friends, general discussions, gender and age groups, and hobbies. Whereas Arabic is mainly used to express humor, poetry, and local culture; English, on the other hand, is more reserved to talk about work and study.

Similarly, Salem (2013) studies the adverse effect of using technology on the overuse of text messaging shortcuts in students' writing through interviewing (211) participants whose age ranged from 11 to 18 years old. He found that using communication applications like WhatsApp and mobile text messaging have detrimental effects on vocabulary use, grammar and spelling as Kuwaiti youngsters use certain abbreviations, clipping and acronyms that are not grammatical in the majority of the cases. Salem (Ibid) claims that technologies lead to developing incorrect habits, distorts and oversimplifies the Standard English Language.

Alfaifi (2013) analyzed the use of intrasentential code-switching in Facebook interactions in relation to (10) topics: gossip, humor, technology, compliments, thanking, achievement, movies and songs, family and intimacy, makeup, travelling, and religion. She found that code-switching is related to the topic of communication; for instance, topics like gossip and humor elicit significantly higher frequencies of intrasentential code-switching. However, she also found that the most frequent English words within Arabic were technical and academic terms, whereas religious words were the most prominent Arabic words used within English sentences, hence code-switching is influenced by the language environment and culture.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Data collection and participants**

The study is conducted at the University of Sulaimani, English Department. A hundred twenty five (125) SMS exchanges were collected from the first and second grade students and a corpus was created to look for the underlined linguistic features. The data was collected over a period of one academic year, i.e. eight months during 2018-2019. The researchers explained the purpose of the research to the classes and only 30 students volunteered to participate in the study; their age ranged between 19- 23 years and they were all Kurdish native speakers. After taking their consent, the participants were asked to send the screenshots of the SMSes they are willing to share to the researchers. Participants were advised to delete all the personal and sensitive information, such as names, from the data to assure that the exchanges were off-hand without the students felling being under supervision. About 15 messages have been neglected: 5 of the messages were not comprehensible; the other 10 were messenger texts rather than SMS. Thus, only 110 SMSes were used in the present study, among which 80 SMSes were sent by female students whereas the other 40 were sent by male students.

#### **3.2. Research design**

This study adopts a quantitative and qualitative method for data analysis. Data has been organized quantitatively and percentages were used in order to indicate the frequency of elements of the language that have been used in the SMS. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis was organized to analyze the communicative roles accomplished by means of these two codes. The research investigated the collected data and categorized the functions of the codes according to studies carried out by Appel and Muysken (1987) and Bader (1995). Before detailed explanation, the manner of code switching has been evaluated. Throughout the evaluation, "bulkiness" was taken as an essential element to indicate the code switching that took place from Kurdish to English and vice versa. Yuen et al (2015) took 'bulkiness' to be the particular element that caused to turn or switch the Arabic (here- the Kurdish) text into English and vice versa. Bulkiness is analyzed by counting the number of the words in each Kurdish or English text, and evaluating the percentages for each language. The result of the analysis shows the percentage that each language scores.

To validate the results of the study and secure the results from differences in language selection as opposed to technical restrictions on the mobile phone, the researchers made sure that every participating student has English or Kurdish/ Arabic keypad on their cellphone. All the students assured that they have both English and Kurdish/ Arabic keypads. However, Kurdish keypads must be activated through a system command outside the SMS window.

#### 4. Results and Discussions

##### 4.1. SMS Corpus analysis and findings

The results of the analysis of Kurdish-English code-switching in the studied text messages are as follows:

Data Collected from the text messages shows that more than 48% of the participants used Kurdish-English text messages. This indicates the tendency of the participants to switch between English and Kurdish rather than using completely Kurdish or English texts. Further, these texts were all written in Romanized scripts. For more details look at table (1) below:

**Table1. Allocation of Kurdish and English in Text Messages**

Kind of text	No.	%
Completely Kurdish	32	29.090
Completely English	25	22.727
Kurdish and English texts	53	48.181
Total number of SMSes	110	100

Table (1) shows that the rate of code switching in written texts (SMSes) is the highest, while using Kurdish alone comes in the second and English at the third place. This might be because students like to use English more often but when the language fails them they switch back to Kurdish to express their thoughts. In fact, the data indicates that Kurdish is used to express complex thoughts and descriptions while English is reserved for the easier expressions and greetings. This result is different from Peel (2004) who found out that interaction is mainly done in the student's own language while English is mostly reserved for issues related to study. The result agrees with Mustafa (2011) and Alfaifi (2013) who found that code-switching is dominant and preferred by students in their daily interactions.

Findings also show that the Roman script prevails over the Kurdish script throughout the texts. Table (2) illustrates the rate of reliance on the Roman script in Kurdish texts.

**Table 2. Allocation of Written Forms of Kurdish Messages in the Collected Data**

Type of Language	No.	%
<b>Kurdish Language with Kurdish scripts</b>	13	40.62
<b>Kurdish language with Roman scripts</b>	19	59.375
<b>Total number of SMSes</b>	32	100

As the table illustrates, the type of the script that is mostly used by the students as they write in Kurdish is the Roman Script. Apparently, most of the students, feel more comfortable writing in the Roman Script rather than writing in the Kurdish script. These results echoes Zawaydeh (2007)'s findings and Bianchi (2012)'s claims. This mixture between Kurdish language and Romanized scripts is characterized by using certain letters that represent the English spelling system rather than the Latin- Kurdish alpha-bet.

Table (3) presents a statistical analysis of the languages used on the basis of words. The table shows the number of words using specific transcripts. The minimum score belongs to Kurdish with Kurdish scripts (24.66%), the second score is English words (33.361%) while the maximum score goes to Kurdish with Roman scripts (41.97%). Hence, the results illustrates that English language plays a crucial role in the students' daily communication. This role can be attributed to the fact that English is the medium of the classes and the learning material the students receive, which exposes students to using English in different. Besides, English prevails in various means of communication like the internet, whatsapp and other devices.

**Table 3. Allocation of the type of language used in texts by word**

Language	No.	%
<b>Kurdish with Kurdish scripts</b>	292	24.66
<b>Kurdish with Roman scripts</b>	497	41.97
<b>Completely English</b>	395	33.361
<b>Total number of words and phrase</b>	1184	100

This study is different from Peel (2004) study which claims that English language is used in writings related to websites, and online searching, while the current study denotes that English is used in formal and informal SMSes.

## 4.2. Characteristics and the factors behind Kurdification in students' text messages

### A. Characteristics of Kurdification

As the data analysis illustrate, Kurdification rated the highest among the codes used. This special type of script is characterized by using the Roman script to transcribe Kurdish words. However, the data showed that in the majority of the cases the words rendered were not a mere transliteration of the Kurdish words, as numbers were also used beside the Roman script. Consider:

- **4oni**- how are you; **ba6i**-Are you fine; **7aif**- alas; **9bay toya**- its your turn

The above words taken from the corpus illustrate that certain numbers are used to represent specific sounds or combination of sounds. However, there was no specific pattern of repeating the same transcript of the same words or similar sounds in the same norm. That is, some of these words were found with a different spelling in the corpus. Compare:

- **choni**- how are you; **bashi**-Are you fine; **chawakam**- dear

This could be attributed to the fact that similar sounds are transcribed with similar letters in English. Worth mentioning that the Kurdified texts were badly or entirely not punctuated, this however, was also a feature of the Kurdish texts as well.

### B. The reasons behind Kurdification

Based on the data analysis, the researchers contribute Kurdification to the following reasons:

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### a. Constrained space in Kurdish messages

Based on the data analysis, students are more inclined to compose the content of their messages in Latin Alphabet rather than in Kurdish. This could be attributed to the fact that each short message is up to 160 characters in length when Latin alphabet is used and 70 characters in length when non-Latin alphabets such as Arabic and Kurdish is used. This means that sending messages in English is cheaper. Hence students prefer to use English in their content messages instead of Kurdish as they can fit the content of two Kurdish messages in one English Message.

### b. Ease of writing

Factors as effort and time are critical in determining the use of English language and Kurdification as a medium of communication. The researchers believe that one of the reasons that lead to switching to English is because of the “multi- tap” or “multi- press” key pads used for writing in Kurdish. The QWERTY keyboard of most of the smart-phones makes it easier for mobile- users to write in English; this feature is not available for Kurdish. The Kurdish keyboard, which essentially needs to be activated in a separate command outside the message window, is at the same time a multi-press keyboard. Of course, using this keyboard takes time and effort. Worth mentioning is that the Arabic keyboard is accessible through the message window yet it seems that it does not satisfy the needs of the Kurdish users as, despite similarities in the writing system, there are differences in the number and type of letters in both.

## 4.3. Occasions of using code-switching

### A. Greetings

Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships require appropriate greeting expressions. Data collected for the purposes of this study shows that Kurdish students use three different codes for greeting; English, Kurdish, and Arabic. Each of these codes can be related to different communicative purposes and different types of relationships. The most frequent Kurdish expressions used to express greetings are “Em katet Bash- good time; Slaw- hello; Choni- How are you and Slawi Xwat lebet- equivalent to the Arabic AsalaamuAleikum”. Each of these expressions is linked to different levels of formality and have different social dimensions respectively. AsalaamuAleikum’ ‘peace be upon you’, or ‘Salam’ which is a shorter version of it and means ‘Peace’ are the only Arabic expressions used while “hello, and hi” are the most frequent English expressions used.

From the content and occasion of use, it seems that the Kurdish form “Slaw- hello” sounds formal to the students and they usually do not use it in their everyday interaction; instead they prefer the English ‘hi’ when texting friends as it is short, friendly and takes less space. While forms like ‘slawi Xwat lebet and the Arabic AsalaamuAleikum’ are more linked to the religious tradition and was mostly found in religious contexts.

### B. Socio-cultural and religious factors

In texts that were completely written in English, instances of Code-switching to Arabic and Kurdish were noticed. These changes in code were mostly on occasions where no straightforward substitute exists in English, that is, where a particular Kurdish-specific or religious- specific meaning is concerned. For example, students tended for a partial switch of the expression to Kurdish or Arabic when using certain cliché expressions, like:

- Thanks to Allah
- May Allah protect you

Here the student shifted to an Arabic expression, though the normal Kurdish equivalent is ‘Supas bo Xwa; and Xwa agadartbet’. This could be attributed partly to the fact that the word ‘Allah’ is regarded as a part of the Kurdish religious culture and partly because the above mentioned expressions are more common in texts translated to English. Similarly, full switches from English to Kurdish were also noticed in expressions like: ‘be pishtiwani Xwa- with the support of God; be izni Xwa salamat abn- God willing, you will be safe. This confirms Peel (2004) conclusions that using English is linked [jzsb.univsul.edu.iq](http://jzsb.univsul.edu.iq)

to specific needs of the students while other interactions that pertain to the cultural framework of the students are normally in one's own language (cf. Holmes, 1992; Merritt et al., 1993).

To further illustrate, consider the following message sent by a student to her Instructor:

Slaw mamosta gian, in sha alla salamatn (Hello dear Doctor, hope you are doing fine). I have emailed you two emails. One for my homework you asked last week and the second is today assignment. Xwat lagal mamosta gian (Good bye dear teacher).

As the example illustrate, the student preferred shifting to Kurdish in the greeting and the closing of the message and apparently it is for affective purposes. Besides, these forms of code-switching can make intra-cultural communication simpler, and speakers sound to be mindful of this reality; that is why they utilize codeswitching whenever it is fundamental (cf. Mustafa and Al-Khatib, 1994).

Most of the students, as a rule, used code switching when congratulating their friends and peers on the religious occasions, as with the commencement of Ramadan (The Month of Fasting), Eid al-Fitr (The Muslim religious occasion at the end of Ramadan) and also Eid al-Adha (The Muslim occasion at the conclusion of the pilgrimage season), as well as other significant social occasions. In addition, code-switching is also used when they wish wellbeing for a sick person; upon person's coming back from a long trip, for engagements, weddings and graduation.

### C. Euphemism

Some instances of switching to English were ~~was~~ notices in exchanges that included socially disapproved topics. It is well-known that all cultures impose rules on the communication of a few definite themes by specific people in fixed circumstances (Al-khatib 1995b). The data collected suggest that Kurdish students tend to use code-switching when talking about forbidden or hostile topics, as they feel more comfortable to talk about these topics in English. The data indicate that they almost always use English expressions like: cancer, WC, boyfriend, girlfriend, underwear, body functions and period. Consider:

- Hi (name deleted) gyan. Injazam bo bkan natwanm amro bem. Periodm lots of painm haya. (Hi dear ..... Please take a leave for me for today as I will not be able to come. I am on period and have lots of pain.)

As the example illustrates, the student uses Kurdification in almost all of the text but switches to English when talking about her period and pain. This clearly indicates that such taboo topics are better dealt with in English rather than in Kurdish.

### D. Prestige

English is regarded to be the language of the educated elite in most communities (Al-khatib & Farghal 2001). Kurdish undergraduate students seem to be aware of this fact and tend to switch to English for the purpose of showing prestige. Some students tend to use English Language to show their educational attainment, that is, to show that their English is better than their friends. In these cases, as the researchers noted, the switches are in full sentences and phrases. Other switches were only limited to expressions of greetings, thanking and apologizing. The most frequent expressions in this category are: 'Hi, sorry, night night 'good night', miss you, ok, take care (sweetie), please, thanks (a lot), thank you, bye, good luck, see you and so on

### Conclusions

In light of the research questions and data collection and analysis, the following points are concluded:

1. Code-switching dominates student's SMS exchanges. However, it is mostly relied on as a communicative strategy on certain communicative and sociolinguistic occasions. The findings indicates that communicative occasions like formal greetings and socio-cultural and religious occasions Kurdish is used while English became part of the student's repertoire in informal greetings and is mostly used as a way to show prestige or avoid Euphemism.

2. Kurdification composes the largest bulk of SMS exchanges due to the unavailability of Kurdish keyboards and the easiness of writing in English. Kurdification, however as a norm of writing has not developed fully as its counterparts like, Arabizi, as the limited corpus of this study illustrates due to the fact that students are accustomed to the English spelling system and the closeness of the Kurdish sounds to the English ones.

3. It can be concluded that the code-switching and Kurdification are appropriated in such a way that it has no fundamental effect on the culture of the Kurdish Language.

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