



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:

The 16th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers

Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

LANGUAGE CHOICE ON UNIVERSITY WEBSITES IN ARAB COUNTRIES

Ewa Callahan
Quinnipiac University

Nurit Kirshenbaum
University of Hawaii

With the Internet unremittingly crossing boundaries, allowing more efficient communication and cooperation among people in different countries and cultures, the issue of common language is often brought into discussion. Currently English is considered the international lingua franca, but this mode of communication also allows other languages to have a strong presence on the web. A number of studies have examined the role of language on the Internet. For example, the anthology by Danet and Herring (2007) provided a multitude of examples. However, questions about the current status of languages on the Internet requires constant research considering the effects of globalization, increased popularity of English, and, at the same time increased popularity of other languages (Callahan and Herring, 2012).

The major study in this area was research conducted by Callahan and Herring (2012). This longitudinal study examined changes in language choices in 1140 universities in 57 countries over the period of 5 years. The study proposed a tri-level multiglossia model, where national language is the core language, English, as the lingua franca, the first additional language, and other smaller languages aiming at particular groups of potential customers or collaborators. One of the big limitations of this study was the fact that the Arab speaking countries that included Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and UAE have been analyzed as a one entity – not on a country by country basis - following the methodology applied by Gert Hofstade (2001). This allowed the constancy needed in longitudinal analysis as the data from earlier years tested Hofstede's theory, but this approach did not permit country-by-country analysis.

This research attempts to follow up on the study by Callahan and Herring and explore the linguistic mosaic of university websites in Arab countries, attempting to answer questions about the level of multilingualism and the choice of primary and secondary languages, as well as how well the Arab countries follow the tri-level multiglossia model. Following the methodology from the previous study, this research examined 160 websites in eight Arab countries: Egypt, Algeria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, United Arab

Suggested Citation (APA): Callahan, E. & Kirshenbaum, N. (2015, October 21-24) *Language Choice On University Websites In Arab Countries*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, and Oman. The sample size for each country was 20 randomly chosen sites; therefore, only the countries for which 20 university websites could be identified were included in the quantitative analysis. However, we also examined sites in Syria (18), Morocco (15), and Palestinian Territories (18). According to the ministries of the education of those respective countries and/or UNESCO university database, each of these countries has more than 20 universities, but multiple attempts to access some of the websites proved unsuccessful. Even though data for those countries have not been used in the quantitative analysis, observations made while conducting data gathering are included in the discussion.

For each site a primary language was recorded together with other languages present. The determination of which language was the primary language of the page was conducted on the basis of the url and the completeness of the content. If two linguistic versions had identical URLs and content appeared identical as well, both languages were considered primary. These circumstances only happened a few times in our entire set. The pages in the different linguistic version were compared for similarities and differences and coded according to the perceived purpose of the translated pages. The results of the research confirmed the prediction that the sites in Arab world vary among each other in the attitudes toward multilingualism and that those attitudes go further than just official languages of the countries. While the websites showed a number of similarities, which was expected due to the fact of the shared language, they also showed a lot of differences.

The countries varied in how often they translated their pages into other languages, in the choice of the language for their homepages, as well as the use of the secondary languages. In the sample studied, sites in Saudi Arabia were most likely to be in two or more languages, as 19 of them were bilingual. Sites in Jordan and Iraq also tended to be bilingual, as the 17 sites in each of those countries were translated, in 6 cases to more than one language. The countries with the lowest count of bilingual pages were Lebanon, UAE and Oman, translating just around 25% of their sites.

The countries also varied in the choice of the first language in which their site appears to the public. English was dominant in this category (83 sites), followed by Arabic (60 sites) and French (22 sites). The English primary pages were most frequent in UAE, where all university sites but one were in English. Two other countries with a definite preference for English were Oman (19 sites) and Jordan (14 sites). Arabic was the first choice for Iraq (17 sites) and Saudi Arabia (15 sites), and French was predominant in Algeria.

The sites in the researched region in general rarely translated the pages into other languages than English, Arabic or French. Sites with more than two languages constituted little over 16 % of the sample. While in the case of the secondary language the sites attempted to keep the same structure and translate all content, and frequently also news, the tertiary languages were often in the form of the basic informatory page or a pdf brochure. The most multilingual site belonged to the Suez Canal University; in addition to Arabic and English, this institution translated its webpage into Chinese, French, Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Russian. This does not consider Kiruk University in Iraq, which offered a machine translation of its site by all languages available through

Google translate. Other reported languages in the sample included German, Spanish, Italian, Kurdish, Malay and Persian, but they represented rather singular cases rather than overarching trends.

The role of English in the higher education of the countries of the region seems to be even more pronounced when we consider also the presence of English as a secondary language, which has been noted in 52 cases. This means that in the whole sample, 84 percent of the sites are available to English speaking users.

The popularity of English is shared by all of the countries with the exception of Algeria and Morocco, where French is the language of choice. We see here clearly the lasting legacy of European colonialism. The other similarity is the relatively low number of other languages present on the sites, which would suggest that Arab countries do not follow the same pattern as other countries identified by Callahan and Herring. The popularity of English and French can be understood, considering historical influences, but according to the model we should see increasing popularity of Arabic and the increased presence of other languages on the sites. Considering that in a number of circumstances, the sites had non-working links to sites in other languages, or pages under construction that were not included in this analysis, this might suggest that the issue of multilingualism is currently considered but not fully implemented. However, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions considering that this research is just a snapshot in time. A follow-up with additional studies, later in time, will allow us to see the changes in the region and to draw conclusions about the trajectory on the languages' expansion.

References

Danet, B., & Herring, S. C. (Eds.). (2007). *The multilingual internet: Language, culture, and communication online*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Callahan, E., & Herring, S. C. (2012). Language choice on university websites: Longitudinal trends. *International Journal of Communication*, 6, 322-355.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviours, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd Rev. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.