RESEARCH VIA SOCIAL MEDIA: THE CASE OF THE ARABIC STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze effectiveness and possibility of research via Social Media (SM) in the case of the Arabic studies in general and in the Arabic linguistics in particular. SM are considered to be a kind of reflection of the current state of social development. This fact opens up new opportunities for the research activity, due to the key characteristics of SM, i.e. their dynamism and mass character. These features provide a wide range of opportunities for research in the field of sociology, history, psychology, linguistics, etc. The use of social networks in Arabic Studies has their own specifics due to a complex of historical, political and linguistic factors. In the field of the Arabic linguistics, SM allow to analyze the dynamics of the language situation in the Arab world, as well as to conduct research at different levels (syntax, semantics, etc.). SM led to the formation of a heterogeneous idiom – a mixture of Modern Standard Arabic, Arabic dialects and the English language. The language of SM has become the object of interdisciplinary research in the field of Natural Language Processing. It contributed to development of different approaches to language processing implemented in the Internet. SM can be also effectively used in education. The Social Media Language Learning is an innovative approach in teaching languages interactively, linking SM channels with language learning. Social networks present an excellent methodological material that allows listeners to immerse themselves in the real language environment, being anywhere in the world. Today the Social Media expand the horizons of research work in the broadest branches of knowledge and allow to raise issues, the solution of which previously required much more time and human resources.

Keywords— Arabic, Social Media, research, language.

1.   INTRODUCTION

The role of the Internet in general and Social Media in particular cannot be overestimated nowadays. Development of mobile devices and

unlimited Internet access at any time in any place created a unique situation, when the frequency of e-communications exceeded the rate of face-to-face communications. Besides that, Media is a tool, which allows to manipulate public consciousness. Thus, social networks played an important role during the events of the Arab Spring, being used as a mean for the dissemination of information and exchange of opinions and views in relation to the topic.

Social network sites are increasingly attracting the attention of academic and industry researchers intrigued by their affordances [1]. Indeed, Social Media have provided new opportunities for conducting research in a wide range of areas of knowledge, thereby contributing to their development.

In accordance with the Arab Social Media Report, published in 2017: "Social media in the Arab world is gaining more ground, growing increasingly localized, becoming less youthful, while remaining a male dominated medium" [2].

The purpose of this study is to analyze effectiveness and possibility of research via Social Media in the case of the Arabic studies. This discipline implies the study of the Arab world from the standpoints of history, sociology, ethnography, etc. That is, Arabic Studies is an interdisciplinary field of knowledge at its core and it is to rely on original sources in Arabic. Therefore, in this study, special attention is paid to linguistic aspects, which on the one hand are a tool for studying of the Arab world, and on the other hand, the Arabic language of social media itself acts as an object of study.

The content-analysis of Arabic-speaking social networks has its own specifics and relevance due to the following factors.

First of all, we are talking about the diversity of the Arab world, which includes 22 states with different historical development, significantly varying in terms of the current level of economic development and political situation.

These states have different approaches to the concept of traditional society and use different dialects as the language of everyday communication. It is also necessary to take into account the intensification of migration processes, as a result of which a significant number of Arabs live far beyond the so-called Arab homeland. All these factors develop a special "Arab segment" of Social Media, which is a unique object for the broadest areas of research.

Secondly, the peculiarity of the Arabic Social Media of the Arab World is language of e-communication. The study of its specifics is one of the main tasks of our research and will be discussed in detail in the next section.

Thus, "Research via Social Media in the Case of Arabic Studies" will be considered on the example of the analysis of the following areas of scientific research. This is a study of the dynamics of the development of the language situation in the Arab world; the development of interdisciplinary topics, combining linguistics and computer data processing methods. Some aspects of linguodidactics concerning teaching of language through social media will also be analyzed.

As part of our study, we demonstrate new research methods in the field of Arabic Studies, the application of which will yield new results. Analysis and processing of the data obtained will, in its turn, lead to a review of the provisions of Arabic research. The ability to carry out an analysis of social processes "here and now" on a large array of data allows to capture the key trends of modernity. We will look at this kind of processes using the example of social media implementation to analyze the language situation in the Arab world.

2.   LITERARY REVIEW

The history of social networks dates back to the late nineties of the last century, when the first network was launched. SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. Each of these features existed in some form before SixDegrees, of course. Profiles existed on most major dating sites and many community sites [1]. The spread of social networks pushed research activity, which led to

the emergence of a significant number of new works in various fields of knowledge, from medicine to political science.

As part of our research, we studied the content of the Web of Science database, determining the number of publications related to social media, as well as their thematic focus.

The obtained results confirmed the assumption that social media are used in the broadest scientific spheres. The total number of publications on this topic is 13 059.

The mention of Social Media in headlines was most often found in articles on the topic "Computer Science" (more than 21%).

The diagram below demonstrates the relevance of the phenomenon of SM for various research areas, based on the content analysis of the database.

Diagram 1. Number of publications containing the term «Social Media» in their names, taking into account the thematic classification.
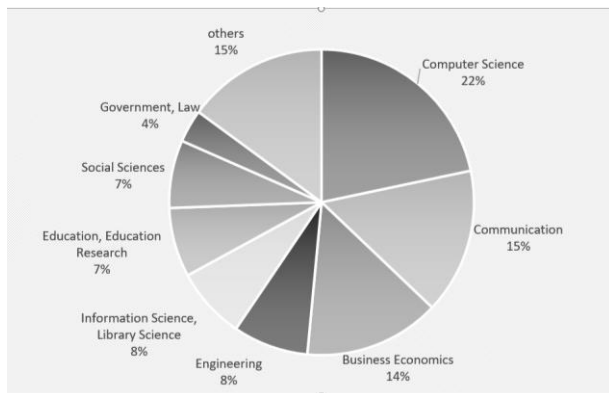
It should be noted the regional distribution of these works. As expected, the United States occupies a confident leadership (37% of publications), England takes the second place (9.3%), while Republic of China - the third (7.4%).

These are several titles of the papers, which confirm the interdisciplinary nature of most studies: "Doing Social Media Analytics" [3], "Social Media and Social Movements" [4], "Social Media in Medicine" [5], "Social Media and Social Psychiatry" [6].

With regard to Arabic social media, over the last decade, a significant amount of research has been done on the development of applications for content analysis of Arab social networks. For example, in [7] a monitoring system is proposed to detect violent content in Arabic social media. As the authors state "This is a new and challenging task due to the presence of various Arabic dialects in the social media" [7]. The language of the social media has become the object of interdisciplinary research in the field of Natural Language Processing. It contributed to development of different approaches to processing of languages used in the Internet. One of the most important trends in the research of the Arabic language via MS is the so-called sentiment analysis, which aims to determine the attitudes of various groups of people with respect to a certain topic [8]. Thus, the paper [9] highlights the major problems and open research issues that face sentiment analysis of Arabic social media. The paper also presents a case study the goal of which is to investigate the possibility of determining the semantic orientation of Arabic Egyptian tweets and comments given limited Arabic resources.

In addition, papers dealing with the Arabic dialectology in the case of social media began to appear [10].

The term social media research covers any form of research that uses data derived from social media sources. Research in this environment can be classified into two types: using social media as a research tool and research on the activity and content of social media itself [10].

3. LANGUAGE OF THE ARABIC SOCIAL MEDIA

Traditionally four periods in the history of the Arabic language are distinguished, corresponding to the main stages of the development of Arab society and culture, they are: *pre-Islamic* - until the middle of the 7th century AD, the *classical* one - from the middle of the 7th century until the end of the 18th century; *new period* (the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century, the *newest* - from the beginning of the 20th

century to the present) [11]. However, over the past decade, there have been changes in the linguistic map of the Arab world, primarily related to the spread of the Internet and ICT. It is obvious that the Arabic language of the beginning of the 21st century differs from the language of the early 20th and starting at least from the 2000, we can talk about the beginning of a new stage in its development that can be called "*informational*".

The spread of SM has led to a change in the use of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and Arabic dialects. Previously the first was used as a mean of predominantly written communication, whereas dialects provided the sphere of oral communication. However, nowadays the dialects are often used in written e-communications. This situation gives a new look at the established approach to the description of the language situation in the Arab world, originally described by Ch. Ferguson in 1959. The previous correlation between "Modern Standard Arabic – dialects" as "written – oral" loses all meaning when it comes to the language of e-communication. On the other hand, Ch. Ferguson' statement that "In many speech communities two or more varieties of the same language are used by some speakers under different conditions" [12] remains correct even half a century later, receiving a new sound in the conditions of the modern information society.

All the languages which are used in Social Media have their common features. First of all, style of e-communication differs from face-to-face communication, because it is primarily oriented on the big audience. Another peculiarity of social posts is hashtag (a kind of keywords of a post) which is used for tweets classification. The language of social networks is also influenced by technical factors. Thus, the widespread implementation of mobile devices forces users to create abbreviations to ensure the speed and convenience of typing with tiny keys (LOL, ASAP, etc.).

In terms of language vocabulary, a lot of new words or new meanings for common words appeared (group, conversation, like, friend, etc.). Most new meanings of common words

are reflected in updated versions of dictionaries. Thus, in 2013 Oxford English Dictionary declared "selfie" to be their Word of the Year. While Oxford dictionaries published on one of its pages the following statement: "Pay attention to discussions in your social networks and you can spot emerging new words, new uses of words – and maybe even coin one yourself" [13]. It is the development of social networks that fosters the development of languages. No official printed edition spread new language trends to large audience as social networks do. This kind of situation can lead to the formation of a heterogeneous idiom – a mixture of Modern Standard Arabic, Arabic dialects and the English language.

4.   SOCIAL MEDIA IN CLASSROOM

SM are also widely used not only as a mean of everyday communication, but also for educational purposes. The Social Media Language Learning is an innovative approach in teaching languages interactively, linking SM channels with language learning. Thus students are encouraged and supported to develop communication and language skills. Social networks present an excellent methodological material that allows listeners to immerse themselves in the real language environment, being anywhere in the world. Information and Communication Technologies and new media-impact on Arabic acquisition as a supplement to traditional face-to-face learning have already proved their effectiveness [14].

Our experience in using various methods of e-learning as a supplement to face-to-face education has confirmed the effectiveness of social networks in this regard. Students will rather look at the teaching materials placed in social networks than in the special environment of e-learning. This conclusion is based on the use of options of the social network Vkontakte in the teaching of Arabic and a number of other courses, starting from 2010. In addition, this kind of collective work encourages students to initiate a joint discussion of various issues when preparing a homework, to exchange ideas

about the correctness of the translation of a text, and to discuss grammatical questions, etc. All this contributes to the expansion of competences obtained. Students of today have become technologically savvy and pro-active users of ICTs. Thus, especially educators, need to plan to address uncertainties by discovering new ways and processes to enhance student learning, performance, and satisfaction through the use of ICT [15].

5.   CONCLUSIONS

Today the Social Media expand the horizons of research work in the broadest branches of knowledge and allow to raise issues, the solution of which previously required much more time and human resources.

Spread of the Internet led to the situation when SM began to play important and significant role worldwide. They are used not only as a mean of everyday communication, but also for educational purposes.

The key feature of the social media language is that there has been a shift in the functional load, which was traditionally distributed between dialects acting as tool for oral communication and Modern Standard Arabic that performs largely a written function. In the field of e-communications, dialects are often used in writing. Given that, the Internet does not have any geographical borders; this kind of situation can lead to the formation of a heterogeneous idiom – a mixture of Modern Standard Arabic, Arabic dialects and the English language.

The language of the social media dynamically reflects both public sentiments and the current linguistic situation, that is why its study remains relevant and requires constant monitoring. In this regard, it is advisable to conduct interdisciplinary research, involving the online processing of a Big Data, sentiment analysis. The role of the language of e-communications should be taken into account when carrying out sociolinguistic research. Social networks are also an excellent methodological material that allows listeners to immerse themselves in the real language

environment, being anywhere in the world. These opportunities should be reflected in the ongoing educational programs for Arabic teaching.

6.   ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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