



Lexical Transformation of Arabic in the Digital Era: Social Media, Neologisms, and Linguistic Adaptation

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of social media has accelerated lexical change in contemporary Arabic by creating new spaces for linguistic interaction, innovation, and adaptation. This phenomenon is important to examine because digital communication introduces new lexical forms that reflect the influence of globalization, technological development, and changing sociocultural practices among Arabic speakers. This study aims to identify the mechanisms of Arabic lexical change reported in social-media research, analyze the linguistic and sociocultural factors influencing these changes, and discuss their implications for Arabic language education and language policy. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach through a systematic literature review (SLR) of scholarly publications on Arabic digital language and social-media communication published between 2015 and 2025. Relevant studies were identified through academic databases and supplementary full-text sources, then analyzed using thematic coding and comparative content analysis. The findings reveal three major mechanisms of lexical transformation in contemporary Arabic digital communication: foreign borrowing and Arabization, internal lexical formation and functional specialization of Arabic expressions, and semantic change involving meaning broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension. The review also demonstrates that Arabish, Arabic-English code-mixing, and dialectal variation provide important sociolinguistic contexts for the circulation of these lexical forms. Furthermore, lexical choices are shaped by community characteristics, age groups, communicative registers, digital platforms, technological familiarity, prestige, and communicative efficiency. This study concludes that digital Arabic should be understood as a dynamic and adaptive linguistic ecology rather than merely a decline of formal Arabic. The findings highlight the need for register-sensitive Arabic language teaching, systematic documentation of emerging digital vocabulary, and evidence-based terminology planning to respond to ongoing linguistic transformation.



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A. Introduction

The expansion of digital communication has changed not only where Arabic is used but also how lexical resources are selected, circulated, and interpreted. Social-media platforms such as X, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube enable users to communicate through combinations of written language, images, emojis, hashtags, audio, and video (Albirini, 2015). This multimodal environment reduces the distance between language innovation and everyday use: a newly coined expression can circulate widely before it is recognized by formal institutions. Recent studies consequently describe digital media as an important site of Arabic lexical innovation, semantic change, code-mixing, and variation (Uyuni et al., 2024).

Digital Arabic change is particularly visible at the lexical level. English-derived items associated with platform functions, technology, and online interaction are frequently borrowed, transliterated, translated, or integrated into Arabic discourse. (Harianto et al., 2025) At the same time, Arabic speakers do not depend exclusively on foreign vocabulary. Existing Arabic roots and morphological patterns are also used to create or specialize expressions for digital practices. Research on Arabic neologisms demonstrates that borrowing and internal word formation may coexist, while recent work on social-media vocabulary shows that established lexical items can acquire more specific digital meanings (Hamdan & al-Salman, 2021).

These developments should not be interpreted through a simple opposition between linguistic preservation and linguistic deterioration. Borrowing can reflect language contact and technological dominance, but adaptation into Arabic phonology and morphology also demonstrates the recipient language's structural agency. Similarly, the emergence of Arabish and Arabic-English code-mixing is not reducible to a lack of competence in Modern Standard Arabic. Studies of Arabish indicate that users select different codes according to audience, social relationship, technological affordances, and identity (Shehadi & Wintner, 2022). Thus, the digital environment creates a repertoire in which formal Arabic, colloquial varieties, borrowed items, hybrid forms, and multimodal resources coexist.

The semantic dimension is equally important. Words that existed before social media can be reinterpreted when they enter platform-specific practices. Expressions associated with following, posting, sharing, stories, accounts, or pages may acquire meanings that are narrower or functionally specialized in digital contexts. Recent studies show that semantic broadening, narrowing, and metaphorical extension are recurring patterns in Arabic social-media discourse (Harianto et al., 2025). Such changes indicate that lexical transformation is not merely a matter of adding new words; it also involves reorganizing the relationship between existing words, communicative practices, and social meanings.

Previous research has contributed valuable findings, but the literature remains fragmented across different linguistic dimensions. Some studies concentrate on neologisms and word formation, others on semantic change, Arabish, code-mixing, dialectal variation, or digital discourse (Tobaili, 2016). This fragmentation makes it difficult to see how these processes interact. The present review therefore brings lexical borrowing, neologism formation, semantic transformation, and sociolinguistic variation into a single analytical framework (Al-Dala et al., 2022). The focus is not to claim that all Arabic users behave identically, but to synthesize

recurring tendencies reported across studies and to explain their relationship to digital communication (Hammouri, 2025). Based on this gap, the study addresses three research questions: What mechanisms of Arabic lexical change are reported in social-media studies published between 2015 and 2025?, What linguistic and sociocultural factors influence these changes?, What implications do these changes have for Arabic language education and language policy?

The study aims to synthesize evidence on Arabic lexical transformation in digital environments and to explain the interaction among lexical innovation, language contact, semantic change, and sociolinguistic adaptation. At the conceptual level, the literature suggests three provisional analytical domains—foreign borrowing and Arabization, internal lexical innovation or functional specialization, and semantic transformation of established vocabulary. These domains are treated as an initial framework rather than predetermined findings; the review remains open to additional categories emerging from the literature. The contribution of the study lies in integrating lexicological, sociolinguistic, and digital-linguistic perspectives while comparing how lexical choices are shaped by community, platform, age, register, audience, globalization, and identity. The review is limited to scholarly literature concerning Arabic digital language and social-media communication within the 2015–2025 period.

B. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a systematic literature review (SLR) design. The review is treated as a research method rather than as a narrative summary: the purpose is to identify relevant studies, assess their thematic relevance, and synthesize their findings in relation to explicit research questions. A systematic review is appropriate because the literature on digital Arabic is distributed across linguistics, sociolinguistics, Arabic studies, communication, and language technology (Snyder, 2021).

The review distinguished among bibliographic databases, academic search engines, and supplementary full-text sources. Primary bibliographic searching prioritized Scopus and JSTOR, while Google Scholar and Semantic Scholar were used as supplementary search engines for broader discovery. Arabic-language literature was sought through identifiable journal and institutional portals available in the search results, while ResearchGate and Academia.edu were treated only as supplementary repositories for obtaining full-text documents rather than as primary bibliographic databases. Search strings combined terms such as “Arabic lexical change,” “Arabic digital language,” “Arabic neologisms,” “Arabic social media,” “Arabish,” “Arabic-English code-mixing,” and “semantic shift in Arabic.” The temporal scope was 2015–2025, with earlier works retained only when they provided essential methodological or theoretical foundations.

Data collection was conducted through a directed literature search using scholarly databases, including Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, Academia.edu, and indexed Arabic journal portals. Searches were performed using keywords such as “Arabic lexical innovation,” “Arabic digital language,” “Arabic neologisms,” “Arabish,” and “semantic shift in Arabic.” the research data consists of secondary sources, including journal articles, conference proceedings, theses, dissertations, and research reports related to digital Arabic language change (Selatan, 2018). Literature was selected based on specific inclusion criteria: discussing digital Arabic, published within the 2015–2025

period, possessing a clear scientific methodology, and originating from credible academic sources. The selection process followed the stages of identification, screening, and eligibility. Data validity was maintained through source triangulation, peer-reviewed source validation, and cross-checking between studies to ensure the consistency and credibility of the findings.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive procedures. Deductively, the review began with three provisional domains derived from the research questions and prior literature: foreign borrowing/Arabization, internal lexical innovation or functional specialization, and semantic transformation. Inductively, additional themes were retained when they recurred across the selected literature, including Arabish, code-mixing, dialectal variation, platform effects, age differences, register choice, geographic variation, identity, prestige, and communicative efficiency (Gugliotta & Dinarelli, 2020). Findings were extracted according to the three research questions, coded thematically, compared across studies, and then interpreted through lexical innovation, language contact, and sociolinguistic perspectives. This combined procedure prevents the initial framework from functioning as a fixed set of findings and allows the literature to modify, refine, or extend the analytical categories.

C. Findings and Discussion

Direct Borrowing of Foreign Terms in Digital Arabic

The literature consistently identifies foreign lexical borrowing as one of the most visible dimensions of digital Arabic. English is especially influential because it functions as a dominant language of software, platform interfaces, and global technology. Terms associated with liking, commenting, following, sharing, posting, subscribing, hashtags, and influencers circulate in Arabic-speaking digital communities in original, transliterated, translated, or hybrid forms (Al-Rumhi, 2025). The important point, however, is that borrowing is not equivalent to unchanged lexical importation. Once foreign forms enter Arabic discourse, speakers adapt them to Arabic orthography, phonology, morphology, and local communicative conventions.

The adaptation process demonstrates linguistic agency. A borrowed item can initially function as a recognizable platform label, but repeated use may cause it to become integrated into ordinary interaction. The social meaning of the borrowed item also matters: English expressions may be associated with modernity, technological familiarity, efficiency, or peer-group membership (Alaslaa & Alhawary, 2020). Users may therefore choose an English-derived form even when an Arabic equivalent exists because the foreign form indexes the digital environment itself. Consequently, the spread of loanwords cannot be explained solely by lexical gaps; prestige, convenience, and identity also contribute (Alhazmi, 2016).

From a language-contact perspective, the pattern is better understood as asymmetrical but reciprocal adaptation. English supplies many source forms because of its technological dominance, while Arabic determines how those forms are pronounced, written, inflected, and embedded in local discourse (Al-Madi et al., 2024). Recent work on English-Arabic code-mixing among Jordanians similarly demonstrates that digital speakers combine languages according to interactional and communicative purposes. Therefore, the presence of English-derived vocabulary should not automatically be interpreted as evidence that Arabic is

losing its structural capacity (Alawad, 2026). It indicates that digital language contact is producing a layered vocabulary in which inherited Arabic resources and global technological terms coexist.

A practical implication follows from this pattern. Terminology planning cannot rely exclusively on producing formal Arabic equivalents and assuming that users will adopt them. Digital terms become established through repeated usage, platform visibility, communicative convenience, and social acceptance. Arabization policy therefore needs to consider both structural suitability and actual usage (Bader & Minnis, 2000). This does not mean accepting every borrowing as a formal standard, but it does mean distinguishing between spontaneous digital usage, widely conventionalized terminology, and terminology recommended for formal communication.

Formation of Digital Arabic Neologisms

A second major mechanism is the formation or functional specialization of Arabic expressions through internal lexical resources. The literature shows that Arabic can respond to digital innovation without relying entirely on English. New terms may be derived from existing roots, assigned new functions, or semantically specialized for platform practices. Studies of Arabic neologism demonstrate that such processes are central to the language's ability to accommodate new communicative domains (Zelvira et al., 2026).

Examples such as *مُنشُور* (manshūr), *مُتَابِع* (mutābiʿ), and *تَغْرِيدَة* (taghrīdah) illustrate different relationships between inherited lexical material and digital meaning. *مُنشُور* can refer generally to something published or distributed, but digital usage specializes it as a social-media post. *مُتَابِع*, whose broader lexical meaning is a follower or one who follows, can be narrowed to a person following an account. *تَغْرِيدَة* derives from the semantic field of chirping and has been associated with the act of posting a tweet. These cases demonstrate that lexical innovation can occur through semantic specialization and symbolic reanalysis, not merely through the invention of entirely unprecedented forms (Hroteková, 2025).

The significance of internal neologism formation is theoretical as well as practical. It challenges the assumption that digital modernization necessarily entails lexical dependence on English. Arabic morphology and derivational resources provide mechanisms for creating expressions that are formally recognizable within the language (Hamdan & al-Salman, 2021). At the same time, the social acceptance of a neologism depends on circulation and communicative usefulness. A formally well-constructed term may remain marginal if users prefer a shorter borrowed expression, whereas a semantically transparent Arabic term may become conventionalized when it is supported by institutions and platform practices. Neologism formation should therefore be viewed as an interaction between linguistic productivity and social diffusion.

Recent research strengthens this interpretation by showing that Arabic neologism is not confined to a single national variety. Studies of Arabic media in Indonesia and Malaysia report processes of borrowing, semantic formation, translation, and metaphorical creation in response to new communicative needs (Sukiman et al., 2023). The evidence suggests that lexical innovation is shaped by local contexts as well as global digital culture. This is important because “digital Arabic” should not be treated as a homogeneous variety: different communities may select different terms for the same technological practice.

Semantic Shift of Classical Vocabulary

The third mechanism concerns semantic change in words that already exist in Arabic. The literature indicates that social media provides repeated contexts in which inherited vocabulary is interpreted through new technological practices. As a result, lexical items can undergo broadening, narrowing, functional specialization, or metaphorical extension (Harianto et al., 2025). The digital meaning does not necessarily erase the older meaning; instead, a word may acquire an additional sense that becomes conventional within a particular communicative domain.

The example of جدار (jidār, “wall”) illustrates metaphorical extension when the physical notion of a wall is mapped onto the virtual profile space or feed. Likewise, terms associated with following, posting, sharing, stories, accounts, pages, and live interaction may become semantically specialized through repeated association with platform functions. Such shifts are significant because they show that digital technology does not simply introduce new referents; it reorganizes conceptual categories through which users understand communication (Darwish et al., 2012).

The social dimension of semantic change is equally important. A meaning becomes established through repeated interaction among users, and platform affordances provide stable contexts for that repetition. The interface itself can reinforce a meaning by attaching a word to a particular button, feature, or communicative action. In this sense, semantic change in digital Arabic is partly shaped by technological design (Kurbanbaev & Baxtiyorov, 2025). This insight extends conventional accounts of semantic change by showing that contemporary lexical meanings may be stabilized not only through face-to-face communities but also through platform architectures and algorithmically amplified communication.

Semantic transformation should therefore be regarded as evidence of contextual flexibility rather than automatically as lexical deterioration. Nevertheless, coexistence of old and new meanings can create ambiguity across generations and registers. This creates a practical challenge for Arabic lexicography: dictionaries and educational materials need mechanisms for documenting emerging digital senses without treating every temporary online usage as a stable lexical item (Harianto et al., 2025). The appropriate response is systematic documentation based on frequency, distribution, persistence, and communicative function.

Arabish and the Emergence of Digital Arabic Dialects

Lexical change in digital Arabic cannot be separated from changes in writing practices and code choice. Arabish, or Arabic represented through Latin characters and numbers, illustrates how users adapt Arabic to technological and social environments. Corpus-based research shows that Arabish frequently co-occurs with other languages, especially English and French, and that identifying such forms requires attention to mixed-language digital data (Shehadi & Wintner, 2022). Research on Arabish also indicates that its use is associated with peer communication, informality, technological affordances, and identity rather than with a single linguistic motivation.

The emergence of Arabish and Arabic-English code-mixing therefore adds a sociolinguistic layer to lexical transformation. A user may select an Arabic lexical item, an English item, an Arabized borrowing, or a Latin-script Arabic form depending on the audience and interactional goal. Recent research on Jordanian social media demonstrates that Arabic-English code-mixing occurs through

different structural patterns and is connected to communicative context (Gugliotta & Dinarelli, 2020). This supports the view that digital speakers possess a flexible repertoire rather than operating with a strict separation between languages.

The relationship between these practices and Modern Standard Arabic also requires a nuanced interpretation. Concerns about reduced use of fusha remain relevant, particularly in educational and formal contexts. However, the evidence reviewed here does not support treating all informal digital usage as a direct replacement for formal Arabic. Instead, the digital environment expands the number of registers available to users. Fusha may remain appropriate for formal writing, institutional communication, education, and news, while dialects, Arabish, borrowed forms, and hybrid expressions serve more informal interpersonal purposes (Sapawi & Yusoff, 2025). The key issue is therefore register differentiation and communicative competence rather than a binary choice between preservation and innovation.

Integrated Interpretation: From Lexical Change to Digital Linguistic Ecology

When the four dimensions are considered together, the findings reveal that digital Arabic lexical transformation is a layered process. Borrowing supplies external lexical material; Arabic word formation and semantic specialization provide internal mechanisms for adaptation; semantic shift reorganizes the meanings of existing vocabulary; and Arabish, code-mixing, and dialectal variation determine how those resources are deployed in social interaction (Albirini, 2015). These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing rather than independent.

This integrated pattern explains why social media should be understood as a linguistic ecology. Platforms provide communicative affordances, users provide innovation and social evaluation, and repeated interaction determines which forms survive. Globalization influences the availability and prestige of English terms, while Arabic morphology and local varieties mediate their incorporation. Youth communities further accelerate diffusion because peer networks reward expressions that are concise, recognizable, humorous, fashionable, or identity-marking (Johnson, 2021). The result is not a single “digital Arabic” but a continuum of practices ranging from formal Arabic to colloquial Arabic, Arabized loanwords, hybrid forms, and Arabish.

This systematic literature review answers the three research questions by showing that Arabic lexical change in digital communication is characterized primarily by foreign borrowing and Arabization, internal lexical innovation or functional specialization, and semantic transformation of established vocabulary, while Arabish, code-mixing, and dialectal variation provide the sociolinguistic environment in which these forms circulate. The reviewed evidence indicates that lexical choices are influenced by language contact, technological dominance, platform affordances, audience, age, peer networks, prestige, communicative efficiency, register, and local sociolinguistic context, meaning that patterns reported in particular countries or communities should not be generalized to all Arabic-speaking users. For Arabic language education, the findings support a register-sensitive approach that retains formal Arabic as the foundation while developing learners’ ability to recognize and interpret common digital vocabulary and hybrid forms. For language policy and lexicography, the findings support systematic documentation of emerging terms and meanings, combined with evidence-based decisions about which forms should be recommended for formal use. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and by the absence

of a directly compiled social-media corpus and a fully preserved numerical screening log; future research should therefore combine reproducible SLR procedures with corpus linguistics, digital ethnography, and computational analysis to examine frequency, geographic distribution, platform-specific usage, age patterns, persistence, and social meanings of emerging Arabic digital forms (Jamal et al., 2025).

The findings have direct implications for Arabic language teaching. Learners increasingly encounter digital vocabulary before encountering it in formal textbooks. If teaching materials ignore these forms, students may know grammatical rules but struggle to interpret authentic digital communication. Conversely, incorporating every online expression into formal instruction would blur important register distinctions (Husna, 2025). A layered curriculum is therefore preferable: standard Arabic remains the formal foundation, while learners also develop receptive awareness of common digital vocabulary, semantic shifts, Arabish, code-mixing, and platform-specific expressions. Such an approach strengthens communicative competence without abandoning the norms of formal Arabic.

Taken together, these differences clarify why the relationship between Modern Standard Arabic and regional dialects should be understood as functional differentiation rather than a simple replacement process. Digital communication expands opportunities for users to move between registers and codes (Kurbanbaev & Baxtiyrov, 2025). The policy challenge is therefore not to eliminate variation, but to document it, distinguish stable terminology from ephemeral usage, and ensure that learners develop the ability to interpret and select forms appropriate to particular communicative settings.

Register is therefore a central explanatory variable. English terms may be selected because they are shorter, technologically recognizable, prestigious, or strongly associated with a platform. Arabized forms may be preferred when speakers seek phonological or morphological integration into Arabic. Established Arabic equivalents may be preferred in formal writing, education, institutional communication, or contexts where language norms are salient (Shehadi & Wintner, 2022). The choice among these alternatives is consequently shaped by communicative efficiency, audience design, identity, prestige, platform conventions, and perceived formality.

Age and peer-group membership further shape lexical selection. The literature associates younger users with greater experimentation, Arabish, code-mixing, and rapid uptake of emerging expressions. This should not be interpreted as a categorical generational replacement of fusha. Rather, younger speakers appear to command a broader repertoire in which formal Arabic, colloquial varieties, Arabized borrowings, English forms, and Latin-script Arabic can be selected according to audience and interactional purpose (Bader & Minnis, 2000). Intergenerational differences become most consequential when new digital senses are not equally familiar to older and younger users.

Platform differences also affect lexical choice. Platform interfaces introduce recurrent labels and communicative affordances, so users may encounter and reproduce terms associated with posting, following, liking, sharing, stories, hashtags, comments, or profile spaces. Highly interactive and short-form environments can favor concise, hybrid, or borrowed forms, whereas institutional, educational, or news-oriented environments are more likely to maintain formal

Arabic (Bader & Mahadin, 1996). The same speaker may therefore select different lexical resources across platforms rather than adopt one stable “digital Arabic” variety.

The reviewed evidence does not support treating “Arab society” or “digital Arabic” as homogeneous. Geographic variation is visible because studies focus on particular national or regional communities, and lexical preferences can differ according to local dialects, educational traditions, language policy, and patterns of contact with English or other languages (Abdel Majeed et al., 2026). Evidence from Saudi, Omani, Jordanian, Algerian, Indonesian, and Malaysian contexts should therefore be interpreted as community-specific rather than automatically generalized to all Arabic-speaking populations. A form reported as frequent within one national youth community should not be presented as a uniform feature of Arabic digital communication as a whole.

D. Conclusion

This systematic literature review answers the research questions by showing that lexical transformation in contemporary Arabic digital communication occurs through three interconnected mechanisms—foreign borrowing and Arabization, internal formation or functional specialization of Arabic neologisms, and semantic transformation of established vocabulary—while Arabish, code-mixing, and dialectal variation provide the sociolinguistic environment in which these forms circulate. The evidence indicates that English exerts strong lexical influence because of its technological and global dominance, but Arabic speakers actively adapt foreign material and continue to exploit Arabic morphological and semantic resources; consequently, digital change should not be interpreted simply as linguistic degradation. Instead, it represents an adaptive process in which platform affordances, communicative efficiency, globalization, and identity interact to reshape lexical choice and meaning. The main implication is that Arabic language teaching, lexicography, and terminology planning should respond to digital usage through systematic documentation and register-sensitive pedagogy: formal Arabic should remain clearly distinguished from informal and hybrid digital varieties, while emerging digital vocabulary should be recognized as relevant evidence of contemporary language use. The study is limited by its reliance on secondary literature and the absence of a directly compiled social-media corpus; therefore, future research should combine corpus linguistics, digital ethnography, and computational analysis to measure frequency, geographic distribution, persistence, and social meanings of emerging Arabic digital forms.

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