

# Will the Internet Change the Multilingual Society of Tunisia?

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## 1. Introduction

In this article, using primarily the results of a survey of college students in Tunisia, we report on Internet use in Tunisia's multilingual society. Since 1995, the worldwide proliferation of the Internet has changed people's lives. In particular, the Internet has remarkably affected individuals in their early twenties, including college students. Although there are many uses of the Internet, our focus is Internet browsing and newspaper reading on PCs and smart phones.

Let us begin with a brief look at the linguistic situation in Tunisia. Since the nation gained independence from France in 1956, Tunisia's language policy has changed more than once. Tunisia is a Muslim country whose official language is Arabic; however, the French language remains popular there (Jerad, 2004). People in Tunisia speak the Tunisian Arabic dialect (hereafter, these will be referred to simply as Arabic with classical Arabic), and French. Although most mass media such as television<sup>1)</sup> and newspapers use Arabic, the newspaper most read by Tunisian people is *La Press*, a French paper (Takeoka, 2008). Furthermore, due to the Internet explosion and globalization, Tunisian people have been increasingly exposed to English.

In this study, we used questionnaire-type social surveys conducted in Tunisia in March 2012. Our first group of respondents was 116 students majoring in linguistics at Carthage University in Tunis. The second group was 100 people living in Sfax, situated on the east Mediterranean Sea, and in Douz, in the middle of Tunisia near the Sahara Desert. We focused primarily on the student data and did not compare the student data with those of the local people because the two surveys were not identical. Furthermore, the student group was fairly homogeneous, reflecting individuals with similar educational levels and interests. In contrast, the sampling of local people was random and sometimes ad hoc, for example, we met them in the caf?, on the street, etc. Therefore, we used the survey of local people as a reference only.

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<sup>1)</sup> In reality Tunisian people often watch stellite TV programs in French and Italian.

The college students, with a high level of education, showed a deep interest in the Internet, while the local people reported less interest. The results of our survey shed some light on the country's linguistic situation in terms of Internet usage and show the potential for more advanced research in the future.

In addition to the surveys, we report the results of some open-response questions regarding what people in Tunisia think of the French language. It is a part of the survey. Although no firm conclusions can be drawn from the objective findings, we expect the results to contribute to future research on Tunisia's complex linguistic culture.

This article is an edited and expanded version of a paper written for the 7th annual conference of TAGENGO SHAKAI KENKYUKAI (Multilingual Society Research Group) held on the Suginami campus of the Joshibi University of Art and Design in Japan. All figures and tables are consistent with the original survey data.

## 2. Surveys

### 2.1 Survey of linguistics students at Carthage University

#### (1) Basic information

In cooperation with Professor Saïd MOSBAH of Carthage University, we conducted a questionnaire survey of 116 students in the faculty of linguistics. Details of the subjects are as follows:

Sex: 19 males; 97 females

Age range: 20 to 32 years old (90% were 20 to 24 years old)

Year in college: 2nd year, 43 students; 3rd year, 65 students; 4th year, 2 students; year not indicated, 6 students

Because the students were doing their coursework in French, the questionnaire was written in French, and all of the students wrote their answers in French. The completed surveys were mailed to the author by Prof. Mosbah in April 2012.

#### (2) Survey results

Q1. How many and which languages do you speak?

Table 1. Number of language spoken by college students

Number of languages	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of students	1	14	59	40	1	1

The majority of the students reported speaking three or four languages. One student reported

speaking only one language, Arabic. All of the students who reported speaking more than two languages indicated that the first language was Arabic and the second was French. As shown in Table 2 below, of the 101 students who reported speaking more than three languages, most stated that they spoke English. As shown in Table 4, of the 42 students who answered that they spoke more than four languages, most reported that they spoke both English and Italian. The second most common language combination was English and German. As Italy is very close to Tunisia, the Tunisian people are influenced by Italian culture. The ability to communicate in German is indispensable to Tunisians who want to find employment in *Djerba*, a Tunisian island in the Mediterranean Sea that is very popular among German tourists.

Table 2. Third language

Language	Number of students
English	93
Spanish	3
Italian	3
No reply	2

Table 3. Number of students speaking combinations of third and fourth languages

Fourth language	Third language			Total
	English	Spanish	Italian	
German	11			11
English		1	1	2
Spanish	6			6
Italian	22	1		22
No answer				1
Total	39	2	1	42

Q2. In what language do you read web pages?

Fifteen students out of the 116 students did not answer. Among the remaining 101 students, 93% reported that they browsed the Internet in French (Figure 1). All of these students stated that they always used French but also used French in combination with another language, such as Arabic, when surfing the Internet. Though in Tunisia people speak Arabic in daily life, French is the dominant language used on the Internet.

Q3. In what language do you read newspapers?

Forty-six percent of the students responded that they did not read print newspapers, a phenomenon

seen among young people worldwide. The students did indicate that they read the news on the Internet, mostly via French online newspapers. The most commonly read French newspapers among the students surveyed were *La Press* and *Le Temps*. Thirty-nine percent of the students responding stated that they also read online newspapers in other languages.

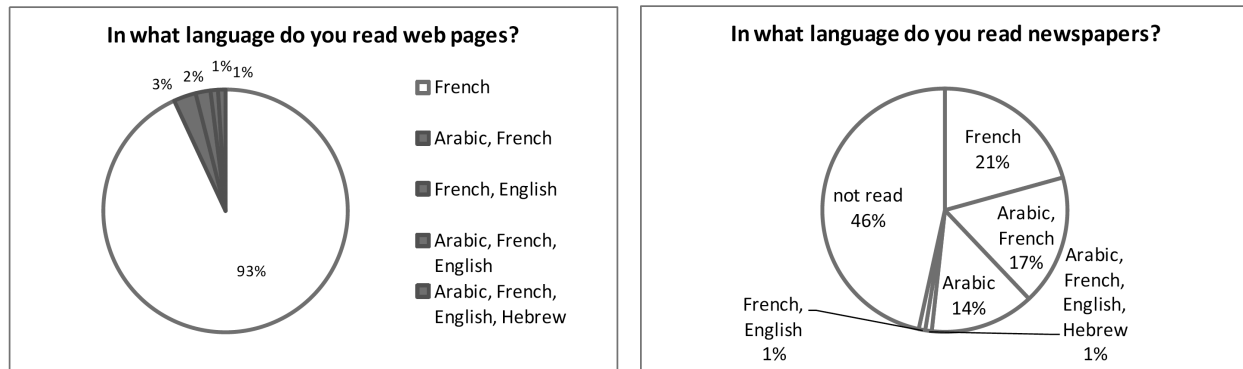


figure 1. Survey results for college students

**2.2 Survey results for local people in Sfax and Douz**

We show the results of the survey of local people for reference only because, as mentioned above, the sampling groups were not precisely defined. We surveyed 61 persons in *Sfax*, the second-largest city in Tunisia, and 39 in *Douz*, a relatively conservative area situated in the middle of Tunisia. The questions on the questionnaire were in French but were translated orally by the guide if necessary. If the subjects did not understand, a Tunisian guide asked the questions in Arabic.

To facilitate a comparison of results for the local people with those for the students in terms of the languages used during Internet browsing, we show in Figure 2 the data for the 83 local persons ranging in age from teens to thirties. Unfortunately, because 54 out of the 83 did not reply to the question about language used during Internet use, the reported results represent only 29 persons. Of the 83 local people surveyed, 67 answered the question regarding the language of the newspaper they read. This information is also shown in Figure 2.

In total, 70 men and 30 women participated in the survey. All of the women surveyed were from Sfax. Concerning the Internet and newspapers, the reported use of French and Arabic by the local people was opposite that of the students. Sixty-five percent of the local young people surveyed reported that they did not use the Internet in daily life. Furthermore, no women participated in the survey in Douz. These facts make reliable data interpretation difficult.

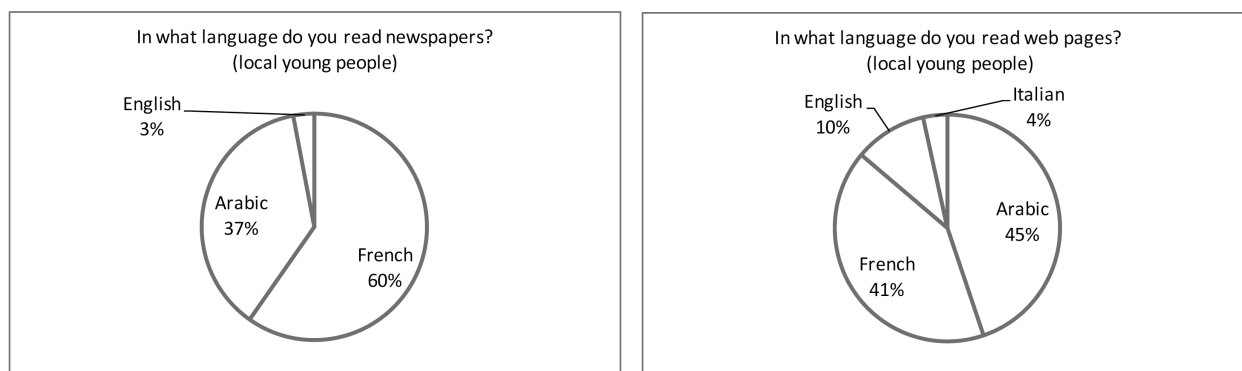


figure 2. Survey results for local young people

### 2.3 English and Arabic web sites

Based on our survey results, the young students seemed to be most likely to use English. Generally young people in Tunisia have been studying English with a passion not seen before the Internet was introduced. They say that English sites have a great deal of the information they are seeking. Most young people say they like English because speaking English is “cool.” Furthermore, some of them think English is easier to master than French and Arabic. We did not ask how easy English is, but we assume the Internet makes English more accessible and familiar to young people thanks to net radios and video sites such as *YouTube*© and *Daily Motion*©.

All of the students who participated in our study reported reading French websites. However, the number of Arabic websites increased 940.5% between 2000 and 2007, in contrast to a 384.5% increase in the number of French websites (Calvet, 2011). Additionally, an Arabic Twitter micro-blog service was launched in July 2012 (BBC News, 2012). This movement has enabled more ordinary Arabic-speaking people to communicate with each other on the Internet.

## 3. Relation between the Internet and a multilingual society

In this chapter, we discuss the relation between the Internet and Tunisia’s multilingual society. The students who responded to our survey reported always using French and not often Arabic on the Internet. We suppose there are three main reasons for this fact:

- (1) The number of Arabic sites is less than that of French sites. According to Calvet (2011), there are twice as many French sites as Arabic ones.
- (2) While Tunisian people use Arabic in daily life, students often receive instruction in French. Thus, it seems natural for them to use French for their Internet searches. In Tunisia, high school students

study mathematics and science in French. In the university, most classes are taught in French. Therefore, most students do not have any problem reading French websites. As long as they can access sufficient information on French sites, there is no need for them to search Arabic sites.

As an open-response question, we asked the students why they use French. This question was not limited to the use of French on the Internet. The following were major themes in the students' responses:

- *French is easier than Arabic.*
- *French has some useful expressions which do not exist in Arabic.*
- *Using fluent French is a sign of being well educated.*
- *Since Tunisia was a French colony in the past, we are accustomed to French.*
- *French is the second language in Tunisia.*
- *We Tunisians are open to different cultures and curious about foreign languages.*

(3) French sites offer information of interest.

In the survey conducted among local people, we also included an open-response question regarding why they visit French websites. A frequent response was that French sites have a great deal of sports information, such as news about football. Since Tunisian people are very fond of playing and watching football, they are apt to also choose French newspapers for this reason.

#### 4. Open-response results for the college students

In this article, we have concentrated on language use on the Internet. In addition to asking our subjects questions concerning the Internet, we included some open-response questions regarding language use in daily life. The responses to these questions are as important as those about the Internet because the Internet is becoming a part of daily life. The questions and results are given below.

(1) In your personal opinion, what kind of people use French more than Arabic?

Table 4. What kind of people use more French more than Arabic?

The well educated	22	Journalists	3
Professors, teachers	20	The rich	3
<i>Francisant</i>	13	Those who work for EU companies	3
Students	13	Those who live in the north	2
Business persons	8	Writers	2

Graduates of missionary schools	6	Snobs	2
Medical doctors	6	Urbanized people	2
African, Maghreb people	5	<i>Arrivistes</i>	1
Officers	5	Inhabitants of tourist areas	1
Tunisois (inhabitants of Tunis)	4	Those who like French culture	1
Tourist guides	4	Those who live in France	1
Those who like French	4	All Tunisians	1
Franco-Tunisians	4	Total	136

As shown in Table 4, 136 responses were given, with multiple responses allowed. Thirteen inappropriate responses were excluded. Firstly, people who use French more than Arabic have a distinctive reputation. In particular, people from Tunis and the north region are often regarded, positively, as urbanized and civilized. On the other hand, they can also be regarded as *francisants*, those who mimic French lifestyle and proudly speak French even when Arabic is more appropriate. They may also be considered negatively as snobs or *arrivistes* (upstarts). On the other hand, “Franco-Tunisian” means those who were born from a couple of French and Tunisian.

However, in reality, Tunisian people do not seem to have a bad impression of the French language. They accept French as more than a foreign language because aspects of the French language and culture have been assimilated into Tunisian society.

(2) In what region of Tunisia is French most often spoken?

As shown in Figure 3, 42% of the students surveyed indicated that they thought French was most often spoken in the Tunis region. This response was expected based on the previously discussed notion that Tunis is urbanized and the people there are well educated. Thirty-seven percent of the students indicated that French was spoken everywhere in Tunisia. This reflects the fact that French has become very popular among Tunisian people.

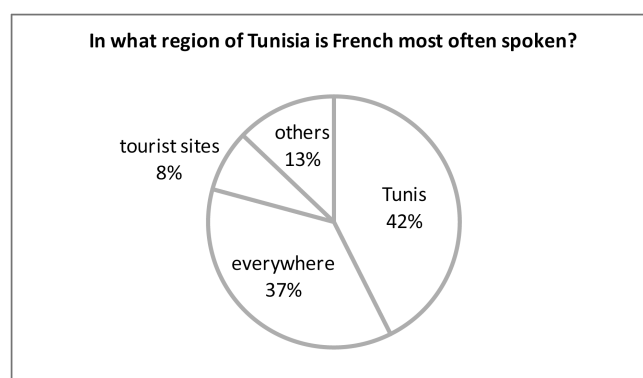


Figure 3. In what region of Tunisia is French most often spoken?  
(101 responses)

## (3) Why do some Tunisians often use French?

We listed in Table 4 the results of the above question about some Tunisians who use French very often from free-answer survey for the students. More we posed a question “why do those Tunisians use French”. In Table 5, the result with multiple answers allowed is shown.

Table 5. Why do some Tunisians often use French?

French is a very common language.	18	They need to communicate with Francophones.	4
Tunisia is a former colony of France.	13	They have limited Arabic language skills.	4
French is the second language of Tunisia.	10	They have a preference for French over Arabic.	4
They were educated in and learned professional skills in French.	10	They want to understand international politics and economics.	2
They need French to get a job in the tourist industry.	9	French is their mother tongue.	2
French is easier than Arabic.	7	One can find ideal expressions in French phrases.	2
French is spoken by neighbors.	6	French is the most common language in Africa.	1
They are influenced by French culture.	6	The mass media influences people to speak French.	1
They seek prestige.	6	Total	105

Since French colonization, French education and culture have strongly influenced Tunisia; thus, the French language has infiltrated deeply into Tunisian society. Some Tunisians speak French as if it were their mother tongue and feel comfortable using it in their daily life. Speaking French fluently is a type of status symbol for many Tunisians.

The responses “French is easier than Arabic” and “One can find ideal expressions in French phrases” were surprising because Arabic is the native language of Tunisian people. However, many people in Tunisia mix French and Arabic in the same phrase or “Arabize” French words. On the streets of Tunisia, as well as in other Maghreb countries, one can hear many modified French words and strange couplings of French and Arabic words.



## 5. Open-response results for local people of Sfax and Douz

We also interviewed 100 local people in Sfax and Douz. We asked them ad hoc, and these results are hard to be said well random. However, these results could serve as a reference for deeper future research.

(1) How many and which languages do you speak?

Table 6. Number of languages spoken by local people

Number of languages	1	2	3	4	5 or more
Number of people	14	32	40	12	2

The results, shown in Table 6, are almost the same as those for the students. Those who reported speaking only one language spoke Arabic. Bilingual respondents reported speaking French and Arabic. Of those who reported speaking three languages, 74% stated that the third language was English, while 14% said it was Italian. The women reported speaking more languages than the men.

(2) Why do you think that French is spoken often in daily life?

Sixty-six people out of one hundred answered the above question, and the results are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. What do you think of French being spoken often in daily life?

People need to communicate with Francophones.	18	French is used in schools.	4
I prefer English.	8	French is easy.	4
French is being assimilated into Tunisian life.	7	French culture has influenced Tunisia.	3
French is difficult to read.	7	French is necessary for those who want jobs in tourism.	2
French is the second language of Tunisia.	5	One can find ideal expressions in French phrases.	2
Tunisia is a former colony of France.	5	The use of only Arabic is better.	1
		Total	66

(3) Are you in favor of a multilingual society?

Eighty-one out of 100 persons responded to this question. Just two persons indicated that they were against a multilingual society. One stated that Tunisians are Arabs, and the other reported a fear of becoming subject to other countries. On the other hand, the majority of people who reported being in

favor of multilingualism stated that multilingualism could, first, promote communication with foreign people and, second, promote tourism. In short, they first considered the cultural and then the economic benefits of having a multilingual society.

## 6. Conclusions

In this article, we have reported the results of surveys regarding college students' and local people's use of language when accessing the Internet as well as their thoughts on their multilingual society. The results of open-response questions allowed us to get some idea of the language situation in Tunisian society.

Among the college students surveyed, French was the language most commonly used on the Internet. As shown in the open-response results, the influence of French in Tunisia's everyday life is well recognized.

However, the Internet culture could change the language situation. At present, the most popular languages in Tunisia are French and Arabic, with other languages, including English, having little impact. In the future, French and English could have equal influence in Tunisia. In that case, the use of Arabic on the Internet could increase, especially in view of the growing number of Arabic websites.

A Tunisian poet living in Paris in a private communication, that since the revolution in 2011, most members of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose political power has been increasing, agree with the replacement of French by English in various stages throughout Tunisia's social infrastructure. Clearly, Tunisia's multilingual culture will be influenced by both political circumstances as well as cultural innovation.

カルタゴ大学 Saïd Mosbah 教授への謝辞 (アラビア語)

شكر  
أقدم جزيل الشكر للسيد مصباح سعيد  
الأستاذ بالمعهد العالي للغات بتونس -  
جامعة قرطاج- لما قدّمه لي من  
مساعدة في إنجاز هذا العمل بقبوله  
عرض الاستجواب على طلبة معهده .

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## Résumé (Abstract in French)

Cet article traite de l'utilisation d'Internet dans la société multi langue en Tunisie. Principalement en utilisant les résultats des recherches pour les étudiants. Depuis 1995, avec le début de la généralisation d'Internet dans le monde entier, la vision des multiples informations en provenance du Net a eu comme conséquence le changement des perceptions de notre monde et a contribué à changer le style de vie de nombreuses personnes en particulier les jeunes générations tels que les étudiants. Bien qu'il y ait beaucoup de façons d'utiliser Internet, nous concentrons notre lecture des informations diverses à l'aide de supports tel que les PC et les Smart Phones. La Tunisie est un pays musulman dont la langue officielle est l'arabe. Mais historiquement, depuis 1881, la Tunisie fut une colonie française durant 75 ans, et de ce fait par le biais de la politique de l'éducation nationale la plupart des tunisiens sont bilingues, arabe et français. De nos jours, à cause de l'explosion d'Internet et de la mondialisation, les Tunisiens se familiarisent de plus en plus avec la culture anglo saxonne. En Tunisie, durant le mois de mars 2012, nous avons fait des recherches linguistiques avec comme outils un questionnaire type et une courte interview. Les personnes interrogées furent 116 étudiants qui étaient en études linguistiques à l'Université de Carthage à Tunis ainsi que 61 habitants à Sfax ville industrielle située à côté de la mer Méditerranée et enfin 39 habitants à Douz petite ville au centre de la Tunisie située au bord du désert du Sahara. Dans ces enquêtes nous avons pu interrogés toutes ces personnes sur la façon dont ils jugent la situation bilingue actuelle dans leur vie quotidienne à savoir l'arabe et le français, et ce qu'ils pensent de cette société multi langue. Nous avons pu en conclure qu'en Tunisie la situation linguistique se reconfigurera bientôt et que la langue arabe deviendra dominante. De plus la langue anglaise se verra obtenir un statu égal au français. Les Personnes interrogées provenaient d'un panel de différentes couches de la population tant au point de vue géographique qu'au point de vue intellectuel et à ce jour il est encore difficile de tirer des conclusions précises. Cependant nous envisagerons des recherches plus avancées dans le futur en vue d'élucider cette métamorphose linguistique dans une société tunisienne en plein bouleversements culturel et politique.

Mots-clés : société multi langue, Tunisie, Internet, situation linguistique

## ネットによりチュニジアの多言語社会は変わってゆくのか？

中挾知延子

本稿ではチュニジアにおける多言語状況とネットに関する言語使用について大学生への社会調査の結果を中心に報告する。インターネットにはさまざまな種類があるが、ブラウザやスマートフォンなどでホームページを閲覧することに焦点をあてる。チュニジアでは、正則アラビア語、アラビア語のチュニジア方言、フランス語が広く使われている。イスラム教国で国語はアラビア語であり、テレビ・新聞など情報メディアはほとんどがアラビア語であるが、チュニジア人が一番よく読んでいるのはフランス語の新聞で、生活はすべてアラビア語でしていると言いきることはできない。また、ネットの爆発的な普及とグローバル化により、英語の広がりも無視できない。本稿では2012年3月に実施したチュニジアでの調査の結果を基に論じていく。方法として質問票を用いた調査を行った。調査は2種類に分けられ、対象は、大学生と地域住民である。大学生の標本対象としてカルタゴ大学言語学専攻学生116人を選んだ。本稿では大学生への調査を軸に論じ、大学生と地域住民との調査ではいくつか質問が異なっているため比較せず、地域住民はあくまでも参考として考えている。調査をした住民は、東部の地中海に面するスファックスと砂漠に近い中部デューズ地域住民100人である。現状の調査から、大学生のネット利用は、フランス語の使用が多数を占める状況であることがわかった。しかしながら、ネットの広がりにはチュニジアの多言語社会を「アラビア語・フランス語」の二大言語から、アラビア語サイトの増加や若者の英語への傾倒にしたがって、フランス語が後退し、「アラビア語が優勢で次いでフランス語・英語」に変わっていくと予測される。そして2011年に革命の起きたチュニジアでは特に政治と文化は密接につながり多言語状況にも影響を与えていくと考えられる。

キーワード：多言語社会、チュニジア、インターネット、言語状況