

# Language Situation and Conflict in Morocco

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## 1. Introduction

Most language conflicts are the result of differing social status and preferential treatment of the dominant language. The disadvantaged language either dies out or its space is significantly reduced. Language conflict occurs mostly in multilingual societies such as Morocco. Moroccan society is linguistically diverse and complex although the range of its linguistic complexity and diversity is slighter than the sociolinguistic situation in most African countries. Its strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East has made Morocco open to a variety of linguistic influences by those of Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Arabs, the Spaniards, Portuguese, and the French. Given this complex multilingual situation in which languages compete and overlap for social, economic and political capital, Morocco provides a rich setting for studying the conflict and tensions between languages in Morocco. The cultural and linguistic context of Morocco has been characterized by the significance use of Classical Arabic/Standard Arabic as well as by the presence of Berber, Moroccan Arabic, French, Spanish and English, which has been seen as a proof of the country existing multilingualism. The Moroccan language market splits into two categories. The first includes Moroccan Arabic and Berber, which constitute a weak social and symbolic capital. The second category involves French, Standard Arabic, and English which are the institutional languages and have a strong social capital. Therefore, there exists a competition and power struggle between languages within the same category as between the two separate categories (Boukous 2009).

## 2. Berber

Berber is considered the indigenous language spoken by the inhabitants of Morocco because its arrival predates all other known languages spoken in Morocco. Berber is the term used by Europeans to refer to the indigenous languages by the Maghreb. The term Berber originated with Greeks and Romans as they came into contact with the people of North Africa. It is etymologically derived from the Latin word "Barbarus" which was first used by the Greeks to refer to anyone who does not speak their language. This term poses some ethical problems to some Berbers and in their own tongue they call themselves and prefer to be called *Amazigh* (pl. Imazighen), meaning free man or noble man. Since the term Berber does not have such negative connotation in Anglo Saxon meaning of the word (Sadiqi 2007), it will be retained in this paper. The term Berber is also more general as it includes Berber varieties spoken inside and outside Morocco.

The origin of the Berbers has not been clearly determined. According to Abbassi (1977), many hypotheses have been advanced. It is claimed that the Berbers were a mixture between people from Europe and from Asia in successive prehistoric migrations. Another hypothesis postulated that the Berbers are from "a Mediterranean stock which originated in West Asia and penetrated North Africa at an early Neolithic period" (Abbassi, 1977, p. 10). They live in scattered communities across

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\* Preliminary version of this article was presented at the 43<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference on African Linguistics at Tulane University. I would like to thank the participants there for their useful comments and simulating questions. Many thanks are also due to the two reviewers for their valuable comments and feedback. All errors or shortcomings in this work remain my own responsibility.

Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. Some of them are also in the northern portions of Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Berbers tend to be concentrated in the mountains and desert regions.

Berber speakers in Morocco belong mainly to three distinct groups:

- (a) Tarifit: spoken in the north
- (b) Tamazight: spoken in the Middle Atlas. Speakers of Tamazight are the largest group of speakers of Berber in Morocco, both in terms of native speakers and geographic region (Sirles, 1985).
- (c) Tashelhit: spoken in the southwest of Morocco. It is the most geographically remote of all the Berber varieties in Morocco. The genetic relationship between it and Tamazight is closer than between Tamazight and Tarifit (Sirles 1985). Tashlhit speakers are the most isolated of the Berber communities.

Mountainous terrain and a primarily sedentary means of existence for many Berbers have reduced the opportunity for very intergroup communication. Therefore, a particularly serious problem facing linguists dealing with comparative Berber is the question of structural unity of autonomy among the different varieties of Berber. There are few linguistic documents available on the Berber dialects. The paucity of comparative studies of Berber varieties makes it difficult to arrive at a much more robust conclusion about these varieties. The linguistic hypotheses advanced so far is that each of these dialects is characterized by much internal variation, not only from region to region, but from village to village as well. Many of these varieties are not mutually intelligible, so that Berbers usually communicate with each other in Moroccan Arabic. According to Ennaji (2005), three major problems hinder the codification of Berber: (a) its official status as a regional dialect, (b) the fact that it is only spoken, and (c) the dilemma of choosing an adequate script for Berber.

It is interesting to note that none of these Berber dialects is associated with religion. The fact that the Quran is not in Berber removes Berber dialects from the religious sphere. However, historical facts show Berber is the vehicle of one of the oldest civilization. Berber kingdoms stretched over territories extending from Sahara of Siwa in Egypt to the South of Morocco (Sadiqi, 1997). Many civilizations had impacted the Berber civilization, among which were the Phoenicians, the Carthaginian, the Greek, the Roman, the Vandal, the Byzantine, and Arab civilizations. It is, however, the Arab civilization that has the greatest impact and has been the most decisive in the history of Morocco.

### 3. The Classical Arabic/Standard Arabic Language

The religious link between Arabic and Islam renders the Berbers admit the superiority of Arabic and have a positive attitude towards it. This positive attitude, in turn, helps the Arabs and Berbers to live in harmony. However, Berbers maintained their own customs and native language.

However important the contributions the Berber language has made to the Moroccan linguistic situation and sociocultural life, it was the Arabic language that has left the most significant impact on the Moroccan sociolinguistics and dominated the Moroccan linguistic situation. The sociolinguistic importance of Arabic in Morocco and its potential role can be understood only by tracing the evolution of the language after the Arab conquest.

Classical Arabic never served as the native variety of any group of speakers. It has always been a language of prestige in Morocco. It is used for religion, education and official functions (Wagner, 1993). It has functioned as the language of unity and Islamic identity (Sadiqi, 2003).

With regard to language policy and education before the French and Spanish colonization in Morocco, learning was carried out in the Quranic schools or mosques. Because of their focus on Quranic memorization, these schools are commonly referred to as Quranic schools in English. According to Boyle (2000), the curriculum of these traditional schools consists of memorizing the Quran as well as learning to read and write. Quranic schools “play an important part in teaching children how to assume their traditional roles in the Muslim community of practice” (p. 2). Ennaji (2005) argues that Quranic schools “impose a mechanical and monotonous form of learning on the child whose interest is not aroused by such a form of study, which reduces the learner’s intellectual and cognitive motivation” (p. 216). However, Wagner (1993) sees the opposite and argues that Quranic schooling “has a significant effect on serial memory and does not generalize to other kinds of memory of cognitive skills such as discourse and pictorial memory” (p. 278). He also asserts that

Quranic pre-schooled children outperformed non-preschooled children (p. 279). Neither Moroccan Arabic nor Berber was officially recognized as languages during this period of pre-colonization.

Modern Standard Arabic is an updated version of the newspapers and magazines, modern literature, descriptions and instructions printed on packaged products. The functional range of Modern Standard Arabic is being expanded in the course of its modernization and standardization. Although the grammatical categories of Modern Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic are generally similar, the two languages may be described as “distinct languages with many differences in segmental phonology, canonical-shape norms, and morpheme structure (Heath, 1983, p. 63).

#### 4. Moroccan Arabic

Moroccan Arabic is the native language of the majority of the population in Morocco. It is one of the Western Arabic dialects spoken throughout North Africa, which includes Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, and some sectors of Libya. According to Gravel (1979), Moroccan Arabic was “brought to Morocco during the nomadic invasions of the Beni Hilal Arabs” (p. 92). It shares many properties with classical Arabic. However, it differs from it in phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. Boukous (1979) distinguishes three types of Moroccan Arabic, according to the ethnic origins of their speakers which he terms *city Arabic*, *mountain Arabic*, and *Bedouin Arabic*. Despite such variation in phonological, morphological and lexical levels these sub-dialects are essentially comprehensible.

Moroccans, like most Arab speakers tend to see their dialects as “deviant” from Classical Arabic. There are structural similarities and differences between Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic in terms of phonology, morphology and syntax (see Sirles (1985) for more discussion).

Classical Arabic and Moroccan Arabic play different roles. Moroccan Arabic is the lingua franca used by all Moroccans including Berbers themselves. No one speaks Classical Arabic as a mother tongue, but Classical Arabic is used in key domains like the government, education, and religion. The sociolinguistic and religious importance of Arabic made Classical Arabic enjoy a supremacy role. Berbers and Arabs regard it as the language of God. It is the association between Classical Arabic and religion that stands out as the major factor to which Moroccan Arabic owes its prestige since Moroccan Arabic is a deviant of Classical Arabic. It is safe, therefore, to say that there was no linguistic conflict between Berber, Classical Arabic and Moroccan Arabic in the pre-colonial era. However, this linguistic situation changed in the colonial era, when foreign languages (French and Spanish) were introduced by the French and Spanish authorities.

#### 5. The Legacy of French Colonization

From 1912 to 1956, Morocco was governed as a French protectorate. As the linguistic legacy of 44 years protectorate period, French remains an important language. French colonization was a turning point in the linguistic history of Morocco. The French language was imposed as the medium of instruction in schools. It became the chief second language for thousands of Arabic and Berber speaking individuals. The language policy adopted followed the divide and rule concept through the establishment of the Berber Decree in 1930. The aim behind this decree is to set up Berber school to shield Arabic and Islamic culture and to prepare a new generation of Berbers integrated into the French Christian culture. As Pennycook (2001) puts it, “It is useful, therefore, to view colonialism as about far more than just economic and political exploitation; it was also a massive movement that both produced and in turn was produced by colonial cultures and ideologies” (p. 67). Moroccans (Berbers and Arabs) revolted against this policy of divide-and-rule as it attempts to break down the cultural and linguistic solidarity existing between Arabs and Berbers.

This French policy changed the Moroccan’s life style and introduced a new set of values. Knowledge of French was essential to obtaining and maintaining power. French was established as superior while Arabic language and Berber as inferior. This supremacy was part of the broader ideology of the French colonialism. The Francophone policy, which has been continued by postcolonial governments created a two sided country with often contradictory ideological and political orientations (Youssi, 1995). Conservative parties and religious leaders advocated the implementation of Arabization, by which they mean “replacing French, the language of the colonizer with Arabic, the language of tradition and authenticity” (Marley, 2004, p. 29).

The presence of different ethnolinguistic groups in Morocco and the social interaction among them has created a multilingual society. The Arab politico-religious conquest brought Arabic in contact with the Berber language, and the French colonial occupation introduced the French language to an already bilingual society (Abbasi 1977). The Spanish zones followed the same language policy of promoting the Spanish language and culture at the expense of Arabic and Islamic schools. Spanish draws much of its importance from the geographical proximity of Spain to Morocco and is spoken mainly in the areas occupied by Spain.

However, Spanish did not have a linguistic impact on the Moroccan linguistic situation as French. There was not any sort of Spanish-style “civilizing mission” directed toward the local population. Its penetration in Morocco was neither pervasive nor as organized as that of French. It has been in slow but steady decline in use. Sirles (1985) attributed this to economic factors. He pointed out that the acquisition of French was tantamount to social elevation, but Spanish colonizers could never provide Moroccans with these same rewards. Unlike Spanish, the French language shows no substantive signs of moribundity and it appeared to have been etched permanently into Morocco’s linguistic character.

The postcolonial linguistic situation in Morocco has resulted in establishing multilingualism in Morocco. The French colonial occupation introduced the French language to an already bilingual society. However, although Berber and Moroccan Arabic were widespread as vernaculars, they did not attain the prestige of French which strongly competes with Classical Arabic in several social and professional fields. A linguistic conflict exists between Classical Arabic and French. The supremacy of French is manifested essentially in administration, banking, commerce and technology. The predominance of French implies strengthening the place of Classical Arabic after independence.

## **6. Language Situation and Conflict Post Independence**

After independence in 1956, various changes occurred on the linguistic situation in Morocco. The Moroccan government’s first effort was to combat illiteracy, which was predominately linked to the country’s liberation from colonization (Aghaou 2004). Classical Arabic was declared the official language and the Arabization policy was introduced. The objective of the Arabization policy was to unite the country. However, the Arabization policy ignores the multilingual nature of the country. The Berber leaders felt threatened by Arab nationalism, mainly the central role it gave to Classical Arabic at the expense of Berber and they become increasingly vocal in their demands of linguist rights (Marley 2004). The overtly stated goals of Arabization made Berbers change their positive attitudes toward Classical Arabic and became clearly vocal in their demands of promoting Berber to the official language like Classical Arabic.

It is also worth noting that English has recently led to significant adaptations in Moroccan education. Moroccan educational policy makers have reformed the curriculum and gave essential importance to the English language. This entails that a description of language situation in the age of globalization is needed to see how English enriches the linguistic situation in Morocco and whether it poses threat to Classical Arabic and French. In what follows I will discuss the effect of the overall effect of globalization and English on the Moroccan language situation.

## **7. Language Situation and Conflict in the Age of Globalization**

The contemporary language situation in Morocco is marked by the use of Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Berber, French, Spanish, and English, which entails that the Moroccan language situation is characterized by complexity, and it is socially and culturally diverse. The status of Berber has changed from a spoken nonrecognized language to a written recognized official language. The most practical measure of this recognition has been the inclusion of the Berber language in the Moroccan system of education. Therefore, Berber has become another language that is obligatory for students to learn from the first grade. However, this policy was rejected by Moroccans (Arab and Berbers) because they believe that language learning should be a matter of choice rather than a decision imposed from above (see Errihani, (2007) for more discussion). Research is needed to investigate the learning achievement of students learning Berber.

French and Spanish have been considered as symbols of colonialism. English is the only foreign language with no colonial overtones for Moroccans. Economic and social globalization, pushed along

by the rapid diffusion of the internet, creates a strong demand for a lingua franca, thus furthering English's role and presence in Morocco as a global language. Sadiqi (1991) conducted a study to show the spread of English in Morocco. The study found that the number of university graduates in English increased. She claimed that the general policy adopted by both decision makers and educationalists in Morocco constituted a considerable force in the spread of English in this country (p. 106). However, decolonizing English is a narrative process of abnegating the logic of globalization. Therefore, we must understand the social and ideological relations with the institutions where English is taught and their relations to a larger world outside. According to Auerbach (1995, p.9) cited in Pennycook (2001), "Pedagogical choices about curriculum development, content, materials, classroom processes, and language use, although appearing to be informed by apolitical professional considerations, are, in fact, inherently ideological in nature, with significant implications for learners' socioeconomic roles" (p. 115). From this point of view, once we begin looking at universities through an ideological lens, dynamics of power and ideologies show up in the curriculum and instructional processes. From this perspective, then, everything taught in the Moroccan universities can be understood socially and politically. It is important to understand once again this connection to politics, ideology and power. As Phil Benson (1997, p. 32) cited in Pennycook (2001) puts it:

We are inclined to think of the politics of language teaching in terms of language planning and educational policy while neglecting the political content of everyday language and language learning practices. In proposing a political orientation for learner autonomy, therefore, we need a considerably expanded notion of the political which would embrace issues such as the societal context in which learning takes place, roles and relationships in the classroom and outside, kinds of learning, and the content of the language that is learned. (p. 116)

It is important to note that US cultural forms have features that transcend social divisions, national borders and language barriers. Morocco has been receptive to external influences, which then become incorporated into the fabric of Moroccan culture. Part of this external influence is brought by Moroccans themselves living in the USA. Workers, students, academics and other professionals continue to consume U.S cultural products after they return to Morocco. Globalization has played an important role in promoting and exporting American beliefs, values, and practices.

This vigorous debate supports the assumption that English is also imposed though in a way different from the imposed languages of the French and Spanish colonized powers in Morocco. What colonialism produced is now assigned to the transnationalism of globalization. English becomes to the language of academia and makes significant contribution to the pluralism of Moroccan language situation. The linguistic authority is no longer placed by French alone. Rather the emergence of English as a second language in Morocco gave way to a drastic reduction of the space of French. Changes in the structure of the curriculum were quite common. A considerable number of English private schools have been set up in Morocco. Al Akhawayn University, which opened in 1995, offers an American curriculum, American professors, and English instruction. With the increasing importance of the use of English in business in Morocco and the interest of many English speaking companies, there has also been an enormous increase of Moroccan businessmen learning English and a huge increase in the establishment of private institutions where the teaching instruction is in English. The International Institute of Higher Education (IIHEM), Ecole Supérieur Internationale de Gestion (ESIG), and Haute Etudes en Management (HEM) are among the schools established for this purpose (Zouhir, 2008).

The general policy adopted by both decision makers and educationalists in Morocco constituted a considerable force in the spread of English in this country. Arabization enhanced the role of English to the detriment of French in the sense that French no longer retained widespread prominence for governmental, educational and conversational purposes (Sadiqi, 1991). In a similar vein, Marley (2004) wondered whether Arabization is complete or whether it is rather a reorientation based on different linguistic option, namely that of English.

It is difficult to predict whether English will completely dominate French in the future. In fact, English is responsible for the extinction of innumerable languages, dialects round the globe. In this respect, Phillipson (1992) pointed out that

The English linguistic invasion has been so pervasive that some governments, representing both small linguistic communities, for instance Solvenia and large ones, for instance, France, have adopted measures to stem the tide and shore up their own languages, particularly in the area of neologisms for technical concepts.” (p. 7)

English has also been damned as a “killer language”, responsible for the extinction of the French language, which has enjoyed an important role for a long time. The Norwegian linguist Maj-Bartt Holljen (1991) cited in Elkhafaifi (2002) explains that

Globalization of communication leads towards a monolingual society... all minor language communities find themselves dependent on the English language, in particular at the terminological level... the expression “a language prey” has been used about the role of English, focusing on the imperialistic functions of the language on the global scale. (p. 11)

Although Classical Arabic has survived the linguistic rivalry and dominance of foreign languages in Morocco, new contenders are entering the ring, an evitable consequence of globalization. More specifically, Classical Arabic is facing tremendous challenges from Moroccan Arabic and Berber. Globalization has triggered new dynamics of political, linguistic and cultural transformations in Morocco and calls for democracy, minorities and human rights are on the rise. Moroccan Arabic has begun to penetrate Moroccan academic and social life. Several Moroccan organizations communicate to their members across different platforms using Moroccan Arabic. It is common to find Moroccan Arabic used in Moroccan newspapers and media. Conferences and seminars on Moroccan Arabic with the participation of intellectuals, linguists and journalists (Moroccans and non Moroccans) are on the rise. It is also important to note that the new Moroccan Constitution represents a historical turn in that it acknowledges Berber as an official language and Hassaniya Arabic as an integral part of the unified Moroccan linguistic and cultural identity.

It is fair to say that with the advent of globalization, linguistic authority is no longer placed by Classical Arabic or French as it used to be. Rather, the emergence of English as a strong language gave way to a drastic reduction of the space of French in education. This intricate diversity have shaped the sociolinguistic stratification, nationalism and identity within the Moroccan society and increased the linguistic tensions between languages.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper investigates the linguistic complexity and language conflict in Morocco. It has been shown its strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East has made Morocco open to a variety of linguistic influences which have enriched the Moroccan linguistic situation. Morocco must be labeled a multilingual country, given Berber, Moroccan Arabic, Classical Arabic, French and Spanish that complete the verbal repertoire of the country. Other issues of interest are the emergence of English in Morocco which became the most widely competitive language to French, the recognition of Berber as an official language and the penetration of Moroccan Arabic in media, academic and social life. The linguistic rivalry between Berber, Moroccan Arabic, and Classical Arabic is emerging as a hidden struggle between Moroccan ethnic groups, which might have negative consequences on the fabric of the Moroccan society in the future. Although Classical Arabic has survived the linguistic rivalry and dominance of foreign languages in Morocco for several years, it is very hard to predict whether Moroccan Arabic will be viewed as a better alternative to Standard Arabic and whether the days of its last vestiges numbered. In Modern Arab thought, the Arabic dialects are constructed as the great opponent, even the enemy, to Standard Arabic.

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# Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics: Linguistic Interfaces in African Languages

edited by Olanike Ola Orié  
and Karen W. Sanders

Cascadilla Proceedings Project Somerville, MA 2013

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Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics:  
Linguistic Interfaces in African Languages

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Zouhir, Abderrahman. 2013. Language Situation and Conflict in Morocco. In *Selected Proceedings of the 43rd Annual Conference on African Linguistics*, ed. Olanike Ola Orié and Karen W. Sanders, 271-277. Somerville, MA: Cascadilla Proceedings Project. [www.lingref.com](http://www.lingref.com), document #2975.