

LANGUAGE IDENTITIES IN MOROCCO: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

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In Morocco, four languages occupy the linguistic space: Classical Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Berber, and French. The complex interplay among these languages is driven by religion, ethnicity, and issues of identity, education, and development. This chapter provides the historical background of the current linguistic situation and how it evolved over the last fourteen centuries and discusses the factors that are relevant to the current debate about language policy in Morocco.

Introduction

Issues of language and identity usually arise when more than one language competes for space, be it cultural, political, educational, or economic. In such situations, adoption of a particular language as official or standard to the exclusion of any other gives political legitimacy and prestige to one variety and leads to feelings of exclusion, marginalization, and alienation of speakers of the excluded language who claim it as part of their identity.

In the Arab world (i.e., countries that are members of the Arab League), the recent demonstrations in Algeria by Berber speakers against the policy of Arabization are but one manifestation of this interplay of language and identity. What is significant, but was not discussed by observers of the situation, is that the presence of French in Algeria or Morocco may not necessarily arouse the same emotions in the same people who are protesting Arabization. To an outsider, this may seem puzzling, but once we understand the linguistic history and reality of the Maghreb (the area that traditionally includes Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) we can start to appreciate the dynamics of the linguistic situation as it relates to questions of identity. Some languages may not be in competition because of the roles they serve.

Critical issues pertaining to the linguistic situations in countries where Arabic is the official language have not received adequate attention outside those

countries. Most people are familiar with the phenomenon of diglossia in the Arab world, where two varieties of the same broad language family exist side-by-side with separate roles and degrees of prestige (Ferguson 1959 and subsequent work). However, in these countries, particularly in the Maghreb but also in Iraq and the Sudan, this phenomenon is but one part of a complex linguistic problem that involves religion, issues of education, development, and ethnicity.

In this chapter, I would like to provide a historical background to the language situation in the Arab world and to its social and political dimensions. This background will be useful in understanding the specific issue of Arabic in the diaspora. This historical survey will hopefully help shed some light on the relation between Arabic and identity in the countries from which the diaspora communities of the Maghreb in Europe originate. To understand the questions that relate to Arabic within these diaspora communities, it is useful to understand the complexities of the language situation in the country or area of reference, something that is usually missing in the debates about Arabic in diaspora.

Area of focus: The Maghreb

I will focus on the Maghreb with special attention to Morocco. The issues and interpretations raised here will not automatically extend to the Middle East and the Gulf (see Suleiman 1994), because of their different ethnic and linguistic make-up and colonial history. I have chosen to separate the two areas because their linguistic situations are different, despite the fact that all the countries use Standard or Classical Arabic as the official language. The two areas are different in their historical experiences, which have led to different linguistic realities. For example, the Maghreb was a French colony, which radically altered the linguistic balance in the three countries, namely Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. Secondly, the countries of the Maghreb, particularly Algeria and Morocco, have sizable populations that use Berber as a mother tongue, often in addition to the local colloquial Arabic dialects. In both areas, Islam is the majority religion which, in turn, gives Classical Arabic a prominent position, as we shall see below. However, religion is not the factor that relates these two areas, but rather language and its cultural heritage.

If one wants to define who 'an Arab is', a possible definition would be one who claims Arabic as his or her mother tongue and claims to share a cultural heritage with the inhabitants of other Arab countries. In other words, somebody from Morocco would claim as part of his or her heritage and culture the sociologist Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) from Tunisia, the Andalusian Ibn Rushd/Averoes (1126-98), the Persian born philosopher and physician Ibn Sina/Avicenna (980-1037), and the contemporary Egyptian Nobel laureate Najib Mahfuz, to name but a few. The same heritage could be claimed by anyone from Oman, Yemen, or Saudi Arabia. There is no question that there has always been a common bond (though not necessarily political in nature) among the inhabitants of the Arab countries. For example, in the 14th century one could travel from Fes in Morocco to Baghdad

via Qairawane in Tunisia, Cairo in Egypt, and Damascus in Syria and still feel that he or she shared his or her identity with the inhabitants of those countries (Hourani 1991).

From this brief introduction, one can start to see the complexity of the situation. For example, while the Berbers complain about the dominance of Arabic, they are all Muslims; therefore, their religion gives a special place to Arabic. Arab nationalists or Arabists, on the other hand, see a purely linguistic and cultural dimension to Arabic that unifies Muslims and Christians. In this view, the Islamic heritage is considered only part of the larger Arab heritage that Muslims share with Christians.

The current linguistic situation in Morocco

There are four main languages that occupy the linguistic space in Morocco. Some are in direct contention for the same space, others occupy a different space or are trying to make their own space. The four languages are Classical Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, Berber, and French.

(1) Classical Arabic is a written language used mainly in formal education, media, administration, and religion. It is the official language, dominant in written literary forms, though there are also newspapers, media broadcast, and literary words in Moroccan Arabic. Classical Arabic cannot be claimed to be anyone's native language on par with, say, Moroccan Arabic. It is learnt only through formal instruction.

(2) Moroccan Arabic is the native language for the majority of the population. It is the language of popular culture but, as just indicated, there are also works of literature and the arts (TV and cinema) and newspapers produced in this medium. Like other colloquial dialects of Arabic, Moroccan Arabic shares many properties with Classical Arabic that point to a common background; but there are also significant differences between the languages at the lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic levels.

(3) Berber is the language of the original people of Morocco. It is the native language of about 40% of the population (estimates vary). It is not recognized as an official language, but it is nonetheless a language of a vibrant culture.

(4) French is not an official language, but it is dominant in higher education, particularly in the sciences, in some sectors of the media, and in some industries, such as banking. There are also cultural activities in French (usually referred to as Francophone literature).

Historical background of the current situation

The Arab conquest and the process of Arabization

Berber, the original language of Morocco, is a member of the Afroasiatic branch that includes also the Semitic and Cushitic languages. At the dawn of the Arab conquest in the second half of the 7th century, its space stretched from Morocco to Egypt, including Mali and Niger.

The Arabs brought with them Islam and Arabic. The conversion of the Berbers was so swift, in some areas at least, that a military force made up mostly of Berber soldiers under the leadership of a Berber commander was assembled to invade Spain and establish a Muslim state that produced some of the great works of literature, sciences, and philosophy by Arab, Berber, and Jewish scholars, all written in Arabic. The first dynasties that ruled Morocco were Berber dynasties, the Almoravids (1056-1147), the Almohads (1130-1269), and the Marinides (1196-1464). Subsequent dynasties were considered Arab, or at least this is how they defined themselves.

The Arabs brought with them two varieties of Arabic. The first was Classical Arabic, the language of Islam. Indeed, Islam gives a privileged position to Arabic. It is the language of the Qu'ran and prayers are conducted only in Arabic. Thus, it is not surprising that those who want to maintain the position of Arabic in spheres other than religion rely on verses of the Qu'ran and sayings attributed to the Prophet that explicitly proclaim the unique position of Classical Arabic.

The second variety brought to Morocco by the Arabs was colloquial Arabic. The fact that diglossia (in the sense of Ferguson 1959 and subsequent work) always characterized the societies where Arabic was spoken has been documented in one form or another for the early centuries of Islam. The most complete evidence comes from Spanish Arabic (Coriente 1977) and the colloquial dialects of Arabic spoken in the Maghreb in the Middle Ages. Those dialects, which bear a close resemblance to the modern dialects in the Maghreb, were clearly different from Classical Arabic on all linguistic levels: lexical, phonological, morphological, and syntactic.

Arabization of the Maghreb intensified with mass immigration from the east, particularly of Banu Hilal and Banu Maaqil in the 12th century (Hourani 1991). Though these waves of immigration were not in massive numbers, particularly in Morocco, they did play a role in Arabizing the coastal areas. A more important factor in the Arabization process, however, was the influx of Arab speakers from southern Spain (Andalusia) after the end of the Arab-Muslim rule in Spain towards the end of the 15th century, and the persecution of the Arabic-speaking Muslim population, which intensified during the Spanish Inquisition (Boukous 1995). We know that most of the major cities in Morocco, such as Fes, Meknes, Tetuan, Rabat, and Marrakech, had sizable Arab populations, but most of the countryside, particularly in the mountainous areas and the South, remained predominantly Berber up to the French colonial period early in this century.

Another factor for the relatively speedy Arabization of the Maghreb is the fact that Berber did not have a standard writing system and had not established itself as the language of scholarship (particularly religious scholarship) or administration. Similar to the situation in the educational institutions in the East, in the main learning centers in the Maghreb, particularly the Al-qarawiyyin mosque in Morocco and the Al-Zaytuna mosque in Tunisia, Classical Arabic was the only language of teaching and scholarship.

The presence of French in Morocco

When the French officially occupied Morocco in 1912, the linguistic map comprised the three languages mentioned above: Classical Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, and Berber.

Before the French occupation, the educational system for the Muslim community consisted of traditional Islamic education, essentially Qur'anic (religious) schools. In the old university of Qarawiyyin in Fes the education system was inadequate; mostly it involved old methods of education, under which students spent years, if not decades, memorizing works of grammar and *fiqh* (jurisprudence). The sciences were virtually neglected. A letter from King Mohammed ben Abdellah (1757-1790), quoted in Al-Jabiri 1985, illustrates the situation clearly. It decreed that:

Anyone who wants to engage in logic, the sciences of philosophy, and the books of Sufism should do that at home with his friends who do not know what they are talking about. Anybody who engages in those studies in the mosques will be punished and will have only himself to blame [translation EB].

I provide this quote to show vividly how easy it was for French as a language to establish itself firmly as a serious contender for linguistic space. The ground was ripe for the French to introduce a completely alien system of education that did not need to build on the traditional Arabic educational system. The graduates of the French system naturally ended up reproducing it.

The system of education under French colonial rule consisted of five main components (Jabiri 1985).

- (1) A European system for the French and other Europeans.
- (2) A Jewish system for the Jewish community
- (3) A Muslim system, but predominantly French in scope.
- (4) A limited traditional Islamic system.
- (5) Free schools system. (Set up by private organizations, these schools were nationalistic in focus).

The main objective of the French schools was to produce professionals with limited education who could not challenge the French occupation. The declared aim

was to keep the majority of Moroccans within a narrow and limited horizon so as not to endanger the colonial system.

On the other hand, the schools for the Moroccan elite were intended to give children of high Moroccan government officials and wealthy families a French education so that they would not feel obliged to go to the Middle East where they would be exposed to pan-Arabic and pan-Islamic ideas.

With respect to the Berbers, the French had an entirely different agenda, which backfired. The plan was to set up Berber schools where the children could be shielded from Arabic and Islamic culture because the French administration's interests '[oblige them] to help the Berber evolve outside the framework of Islam,' in the words of Lyautey (arguably the most influential French administrator in Morocco). As Roger Gaudefroy-Demombynes, a high-ranking officer of the colonial administration explicitly said:

... [it is] dangerous to allow the formation of a united phalanx of Moroccans having one language. We must utilize to our advantage the old dictum 'divide and rule.' The presence of a Berber race is a useful instrument for counterbalancing the Arab race.

The linguistic dimension of this educational policy was to avoid giving any prominent position to Arabic within the Berber community, since Arabic was the language of Islam, the faith of both Arabs and Berbers, and also the linguistic anchor that linked the Maghreb to the East. As the French official Marty put it:

[The Franco-Berber school is] French in its instruction and life, Berber in its pupils and environment...Therefore, there is no foreign intermediary. All Arabic instruction, all institutions by the *faqih* [Koranic school teacher], every Islamic manifestation will be resolutely avoided.

Piquet 1918 further argues that the creation of Franco-Berber schools

... is an excellent, but unfortunately late idea in our possessions in the Maghreb ... [A] significant part of the population in Morocco does not speak Arabic or speaks the two languages and we have no interest in spreading Arabic, the language of pan-Islamism [translation EB].

This policy culminated in the infamous Berber Decree (Dahir of 1914, enacted in 1930) whose direct aim was to set up different judicial systems for Arabs and Berbers, but which was seen by the nationalists as part of the attempt to divide the country by separating Arabs and Berbers. The enactment of the Berber Decree led to protests by both Berbers and Arabs. The Berbers revolted partly because the decree was taken as an attempt to weaken Islam among the Berber community and to divide the country. For the Arabs, it was seen as an attempt to deny the Muslim and Arab identity of Morocco.

These reactions clearly show the different legitimizing factors for Classical Arabic. For the Berbers, Classical Arabic is crucial to their identity as Muslims. So, to be denied this language is to be denied their religious identity. For the Arabs,

Classical Arabic is the anchor to the East and to deny it is to deny unity with other Arab countries. Some of the influential leaders of the nationalist movement, such as Allal Al-Fassi, leader of the Independence Party, had a traditional Islamic education in Morocco and the Middle East and envisaged post-independence Morocco as an Arab country, with Arabic replacing French as the main language of education and of all cultural, political, and economic spheres.

This brief survey of the educational system and its linguistic dimensions in the colonial period shows the extent to which the French colonial administration attempted to use language as a wedge between the two main groups of the Moroccan population. Though the policy to divide the two groups ultimately failed, the interplay between the languages in Morocco became more complicated with the entrenchment of French in the country through the occupation of the educational and economic spaces.

The postcolonial period

After the end of the colonial period 1956, Morocco inherited systems of education and administration in which French was dominant. Though Classical Arabic was recognized in the constitution of independent Morocco as the only official language, in the education system, apart from Classical Arabic in religion courses, all the subjects in the school curriculum were taught in French. In fact, a significant number of the teaching corps was composed of French or Moroccan graduates of the French colonial education system who could not, or felt they could not, teach in Arabic.

The situation of having an educational system dominated by a colonial language was obviously not acceptable to the leaders of the independence movement, who since 1956 have become either members of the government or the opposition. Since the early years of independence, calls were made to Arabicize the education and administration systems. The continuing presence of French was seen as a symbol that the country had not fully attained its independence.

The graduates of the traditional and non-official schools of the colonial period (called free schools) who had often finished their graduate educations in the Middle East, mainly in Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, had a view of Morocco after independence as an Arab country whose ties should be with the Arab East. The following letter from the newspaper, *Al-Alam* (the mouthpiece of the Isqal moderate/conservative party) addressed to the prime minister in 1973, clearly sums up the argument for Arabization:

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that this foreign language [French] is still dominant in the administration, such as agriculture, taxation, education, postal and communication service, law enforcement, local councils, and commerce. Though a few citizens know this language, the overwhelming majority of the citizens do not know it. Therefore, their interests are ignored because of the administration's insistence on using a foreign language. Using a foreign language to

deal with the interests of the Moroccan Muslim citizens is considered an infringement on Islam, the Qu'ran, and the national language decreed by the constitution. [Translation EB]

This argument, based on religion, has been revived recently by religious conservatives. This current of thought has always existed in Morocco, but now is more influential as a political force. Given its ideology, it lays claims to Classical Arabic, but for different reasons than those of Arab Nationalism.

The argument for Arabization was also embraced by Arab nationalists, but for different reasons. Here, the main argument is not based on the religious identity of the country, but rather on the idea that Morocco is an Arab country that should also aspire to Arab unity; a goal that is not attainable as long as Arabic is in a turf-battle with French. In this respect, the presence of French was, and is still, seen as an obstacle to the effort to firmly bind Morocco to the other Arab countries.

The ideas of Arab nationalism were dominant in the Middle East, particularly in the third quarter of this century. I should point out that the idea of an Arab nation as a political entity is relatively modern (the concept of a common bond between Arabs has always existed; what is new is the notion that the countries with Arabic as official language share a common bond and presumably a single cultural entity that can justify forming a single political entity). This idea had its beginnings in the Middle East as a reaction to the excesses of the Ottoman Empire that ruled the Arab provinces (Duri 1987). For example, common complaints, which echo those against the French colonial administration in Morocco, included (i) education in Turkish, (ii) administration in Turkish, including court proceedings, (iii) officials who are not Arabs and speak limited Arabic, if any. The push for Arabism took different forms, such as the publication of Arabic masterpieces from the golden age of Arabic civilization and the formation of societies to advance the interests of the Arab subjects of the Ottoman Empire. It has since taken different tones and arguments as the events evolved starting with breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the British and French colonialism in the area, to the events of the second half of this century, the Suez crisis, the Arabic-Israeli conflict, and the Algerian war of independence, to mention the three main factors that played a role in this debate. According to Arabic nationalist-inspired discourse, 'comprehensive Arabization is a necessary condition to confirm our identity' (Al-Jabiri 1985:147). The process of Arabization must 'aim not just to get rid of French but also, and importantly, ... the local Berber and Arabic dialects, and the ban on using any language or dialect in the school, the radio, and television other than Classical Arabic'. According to this view, Classical Arabic is central to the national and pan-Arab identity. The other languages are seen as obstacles to attaining that goal.

The graduates of the French system, many of whom finished their educations in France, were not as ready to embrace Arabisation. They wanted an independent Morocco, but they were not eager to dismantle the system of education

left by the French. Therefore, they did not object to the continuing presence of French as the language of education and administration. In addition to the advantages it gave them, they saw it as one way to stay connected to the West. They were not hostile to Arabic, but they saw no conflict between Arabic and French co-existing with separate functions. As far as Berber was concerned, they were not eager to give it the prominent role desired by its advocates.

As far as the Berber leaders were concerned, they wanted a recognition of the place of Berber in the Moroccan identity beyond the folkloric representation of Berber culture for tourism and entertainment. They advocated a more prominent role for Berber and felt threatened by Arab nationalism, especially by the central role it gave to Arabic at the expense of other languages (Akhyat 1994). They felt that Berber would be diluted in the stronger and larger Arab world. This does not imply that they opposed Arabic in its religious role. Arabic, however, can be part of the religious identity while allowing other languages to fulfill other functions. They often drew parallels with the situation in Pakistan and Iran where the national languages are Urdu and Persian, respectively, while Arabic is the language of religion. They also advocated French remaining an important language, because they hoped that it keeps the Maghreb from being exclusively anchored to the East, which threatens Berber. The following quote from a Berber member of parliament illustrates how the argument is usually framed (translated from the French original in Grandguillaume 1983:87):

We are for Arabization and defend Arabic as the language of Islam and national unity. But we want the creation of an institute for Berber to preserve this language from extinction ... We also think that [Arabic/French] bilingualism is necessary ... because if we adopt monolingualism [Arabic only], we will loose our vertical cultural relations [with Europe and Africa, EB]

The arguments have been stated more directly and forcefully in recent years with the easing of restrictions on the media and political and cultural organizations in Morocco. For example, Akhyat (1994:23) argues that giving Berber its rightful place beside Arabic can only enrich the Moroccan culture. Then he argues that 'Arabization is based solely on ideological considerations' which do not rely on any careful study of the linguistic reality in the country. According to Akhyat, this explains why the process has been fraught with difficulties since its inception.

This criticism of the Arabization policy opens the advocates of Berber to charges of outside manipulation, but this is of course not justified. The French did try to use Berber as a wedge in the Maghreb to keep their grip on the area during the colonial period, as we saw above. Moreover, the French media exaggerate when they equate Arabization with intellectual terrorism (Le Monde 1991). However, this does not impact the situation locally. The Berber advocates' perceived silence on the question of French and occasionally outright defense of the pres-

ence of French is out of concern for their language and identity from the impact of total Arabization and particularly its political pan-Arabic overtones.

To summarize, there are various factors that are central to the interplay between the main languages that occupy the linguistic space in Morocco. One current would like to see Classical Arabic as the only dominant language. The adherents of this view oppose the continuing presence of French, particularly in the educational system. The religious conservatives see that as a claim that Arabic is not adequate for the task, which in turn they take as an implicit attack on religion (a familiar charge dating back to the Ottoman rule in the Levant — namely that to weaken Arabic is to weaken Islam). The Arab nationalists see it as an obstacle to Arab unity, given that Arabic is the most important single criterion for Arab identity. Another current advocates a more prominent position for Berber, given its status as the original language of the country. Moroccan identity, the argument goes, is Berber, Arab, and sub-Saharan African. Yet another current sees French, and maybe other foreign languages, playing a role, particularly in the educational system. One of the arguments is that the educational resources do not exist to support adequate scientific research in Arabic. According to this view, the question of language policy should be framed in pragmatic developmental terms. The presence of French is seen as crucial to remaining open to the world, the West in particular. The drive for Arabization is seen, then, as either premature or not well-enough planned, as evidenced by the problems that have plagued this process.

Overview of the current linguistic situation

Currently, the whole of the elementary and secondary system is Arabized. However, university education, particularly in the sciences, is still in French and will most likely remain so for the foreseeable future. This split has led to some problems, with some students having an inadequate background in French when they reach the university. An adverse effect of this situation is that more students are enrolling in Arabized nonscience subjects, a situation that defeats one of the goals of the education system to produce more science graduates.

Another result of this situation is that there is strong competition for enrollment in private French schools. This widens an already existing gulf between the few who can afford a French education and the vast majority of the population, who use the public education system (World Bank 1995). This criticism of Arabization does not imply opposition to it; it is only a criticism of a process that seems to be driven exclusively by political and ideological considerations.

At the same time, there is more space given to Berber in Morocco. There are now television news programs, papers, and magazines (the weekly *Tidmi*, the monthlies: *Tifawt*, *Tifinagh*, *Tamut*, and the quarterlies: *Amoud* and *Tasafaout*) in Berber. More and more government officials and intellectuals openly declare Berber to be part of the Moroccan identity. However, this acknowledgment has yet to translate into concrete efforts, such as teaching Berber in schools or even recognizing Berber as an official language beside Arabic.

In Europe, and in France in particular, there is an active Berber movement. One of its declared aims is to stave off the extinction of Berber in the home country by teaching it in schools and by developing a writing system or reviving the *Tifinagh* script. The question of Berber back home, as in Morocco, is often articulated as a question of human rights. This is particularly the position of the Amazigh World Congress (AWC): 'The Amazigh World Congress is determined to continue its peaceful struggle for the restoration of ... identity, linguistic, and cultural rights [of the Berbers]'. AWC has set among its objectives, 'the defense and promotion of the cultural identity of the Amazigh [Berber] nation'. What is new here is the idea is that the Berbers of the Maghreb, as a whole, form a nation; a single entity. This position is different from that in the previous debate, when each Berber group took up its cause within its own country. The reason is that geographically, the Berbers within the Maghreb do not form a homogeneous entity, but it is in the diaspora, in Europe in this case, that one can sometimes transcend geographical barriers, a common phenomenon within diaspora communities.

As far as French is concerned it is still an important language for economic reasons, though it is increasingly giving ground to English in higher education (Boukous 1995). In fact, there are some who propose replacing French with English, since English is the dominant international language and does not have the same colonial overtones as far as Morocco is concerned.

Conclusion

I have tried to provide an overview of the current linguistic situation in Morocco and its history. The interaction between the languages in question — namely Berber, Classical Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, and French is determined by ethnicity, religion, social class, and educational background. This is the crucial reason why any attempt to have one language take over the space previously occupied by another language can be difficult. The question, then, is how this situation plays out within the Moroccan and Maghrebi communities in the west. For example, we can expect that Classical Arabic will be maintained in some fashion (as a liturgical language) regardless of ethnic background, or identity, because of its central religious role. The situation with respect to the spoken languages — namely Berber and Colloquial Arabic, should be different, with ethnic identity playing a major role in efforts to maintain these languages. These are important questions that must await further study. I hope that this exposition can at least help sharpen them and put them in the proper context.

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