

**OVERVIEW OF THE MOROCCAN LANGUAGE SITUATION****\*Youssef Laaraj**

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**Abstract**

Morocco is home for a great cultural and linguistic diversity. The country's rich history, along with its geographically strategic location as a major intersection of economic, cultural, and political interactions, have rendered the country an outstanding icon of linguistic and cultural richness. Irrespective of the divergent views about the significance and ramifications of this diversity, Morocco shows pride for the converging factors which created the country's rich language landscape. An amount of research showcase Morocco's linguistic mosaic and accord that the country is a model of multilingualism and multiculturalism. This article reveals how national as well as foreign languages are employed to fulfill varied and sometimes overlapping functions, especially in education. It is based on the review and analysis of several official and research documents in order to find out how many languages are operating and what roles each is appropriating in this heated arena. Following a thorough analysis of the country's linguistic situation, the article exposes how Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic (MA), Amazigh, French, Spanish, and English are all operating abreast. The aim is to explore the space and functions each language occupies in this multilingual setting.

**Keywords:** Morocco, Language situation, linguistic diversity, Moroccan constitution, multilingualism, national languages, foreign languages

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**INTRODUCTION**

The admixture of a strategic geographical location and a rich history made of the Kingdom of Morocco an iconic terrain of cultural and linguistic diversity. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, language diversity peaked as foreign languages gained significant ground and national languages gained official recognition. Modern Standard Arabic, Amazigh, Moroccan Arabic (MA) or *Darija*, French, English and other foreign languages are all used in different contexts all over the country (e.g., Daniel & Ball, 2009; Marley, 2004; Tomaštitk, 2010; Zouhir, 2013). Irrespective of the dispute whether the status quo is favourable or not, it has brought about serious quandary, especially in education. Hence, Morocco's language and cultural pluralism has been attracting linguists and researchers to investigate its factors and implications. In his study of the *Attitudes in Morocco Following Recent Changes in Language Policy*, Marley (2004) asserts that "Morocco is a complex multilingual country" (p. 25). The author accounts for this situation by referring to its fountainhead; he states, in this respect, that the country's "strategic location at the crossroads of Africa, Europe and the Middle East has meant that for centuries Morocco has been open to a variety of cultural and linguistic influences" (p. 26). Colonisation and openness to other cultures have been conducive to a multilingual state where different languages are used simultaneously. Thus, in addition to national languages, foreign languages constitute an indivisible segment of the Moroccan language landscape. Having been close to western countries along with being occupied by two major colonial forces, Morocco is now home to different foreign languages.

**Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)**

Modern Standard Arabic has always been regarded a unique symbol of the nation's unity and uniqueness. In attempt to preserve its national language and showcase its importance for

the common identity, the Kingdom's Constitution has long defined Arabic as the official national language (The Constitution, 2011, art. 5; The Constitution 1996, preamble; The Constitution 1992, preamble; The Constitution 1972, preamble; The Constitution 1962, preamble). Undisputedly, for cultural, historical and religious reasons, Modern Standard Arabic is a major language Moroccans use and appreciate. Marley (2004) corroborates this point and states that Standard Arabic has always been a language of prestige in Morocco. Despite its deliberate marginalisation during the colonial era, the Arabic language has regained its prestigious leadership over the language arena forthwith after the ending of the French occupation. Over the second half of the last century, the national language has become instrumental in most sectors in the country. In education, Modern Standard Arabic has regained its incomparably august position. Hitherto, Modern Standard Arabic is the prime medium of instruction through all elementary, primary, and partially throughout secondary education. In higher education, however, French is the medium of instruction of all scientific subjects (i.e., in schools of engineering, Faculties of medicine, Faculty of Sciences, Schools of technology, etc...); Modern Standard Arabic is the medium of instruction only in social and human sciences (i.e., history, geography, law, Islamic studies, etc...). In the public administration, it is also used as the main language of official written communication. This applies also to the media, where the State's first official language is the major language of the press especially, while broadcast media use a mixture of languages and varieties. Notwithstanding its prestige, Modern Standard Arabic is facing considerable challenges in a presently heated language competition. The State's official language appears to take a turn to degradation as emergent constraints undermine its use and give way to the growth of foreign languages in general and French and English in particular. The immense booming of foreign languages in Morocco has already put Modern Standard Arabic at stake had it not been tightly associated with people's faith and divine revelations. For a great majority of people, this language reflects the belonging to the Arab and Muslim world and a

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shelter against the foreigners (Lekchiri *et al.*, 2018; Marley, 2004). Evidently, Moroccans maintain unanimous positive attitudes towards the Arabic language and its importance to identity and culture regardless of the perceptible change in power balance taking place in today's Moroccan linguistic situation.

### Moroccan Arabic (MA)

Besides the standard form of Arabic, Moroccan Arabic (MA), widely known as *Darija*, is the most commonly used means of daily communication across the country. Despite its being mostly considered a "dialect", linguists and activists claim its full-fledged importance in the Moroccan language arena. Sadiqi (2006) asserts that MA is one of the major languages used in Morocco. Though it is not mentioned in the official documents for its being deemed a mere local variety of Arabic, *Darija* presently serves as the chief means of social interaction among Moroccans of diverse backgrounds. For many, it is the lingua Franca Moroccans with different lingos could communicate through thanks to its allegedly wide acceptance, understanding, and usage. Along the first years of the new millennium, *Darija* witnessed unprecedented use in media communication particularly. The conventional channel of social interaction has become, on the spur of the moment, a major language in the local media through myriad broadcast radio programmes as well as televised programmes including sitcoms, translated soap operas, chat shows, and even the news bulletins. Indeed, the 'liberation' of the media not only in Morocco, but in most of the Arab countries has resulted in the proliferation of private independent print press and radio stations with different language philosophies and policies. In order to reach a larger audience as well as cater for the high illiteracy rates, these media employ local dialect to attract a larger audience. In effect, with the booming of the local media, *Darija* has regained significant ground in Morocco's language landscape. Daniel and Ball (2009) go along with Sadiqi (2006) and report that *Darija*, in addition to Amazigh and Modern Standard Arabic -the presently official languages of the State- is a major component of the linguistic fabric in Morocco (p. 125). Interestingly, amidst the heated debate on language policy, social activist and CSEFRS member Nouredine Ayouch has been advocating for the adoption of *Darija* as a language of instruction in the Moroccan schools, especially in the elementary stage. In a debate broadcasted by Moroccan channel 2M<sup>1</sup>, he argued with prominent writer Abdellah El Aroui, who was supportive of the maintenance of the standard form of Arabic, that *Darija* is the actual undisputed mother tongue of Moroccans and, thus, should be adopted as a prime medium of instruction (2M, 2013).

### Amazigh Language

For decades, Amazigh activists struggled for the official recognition of the Amazigh language and its promotion through education. Activists' persistent militancy coupled with official tendency to acknowledge Amazigh as a part and parcel of the Moroccan linguistic and cultural legacy has, at last, enabled Amazigh to get around the bottleneck and be the country's second official language. Unprecedentedly, the last

referendum recognised Amazigh as an official language following the calls advocating its full-fledged significance as an equally national language (The Constitution, 2011). Reportedly, Amazigh had been the language of indigenous people of North Africa in general and Morocco in particular. This "Hamito-semetic language belonging to the Afro-Asiatic family is the oldest language in North Africa" (Bendouqi *et al.*, 2010, p.69). The formerly endangered code has regained official and public recognition in the recent years after the increasing demands for restorations and empowerment. Amazigh comprises three main language varieties *Tarifit*, *Tachlhit*, and *Tassoussit* spoken respectively in the north east, middle, and medium south of the country (Zouhir, 2013). In examining the linguistic situation of Morocco, Zouhir asserts that thanks to its significance as a national heritage, Amazigh has gained its acknowledgment as an official language abreast of Arabic in the recently issued constitution for the first time in modern history. Morocco's positive shift towards the recognition of Amazigh as a national heritage aimed to maintain it as a cultural legacy which enriches the country's linguistic pluralism, especially that "language is an integral part of Moroccans' national identity, religion, and culture" (Buckner, 2011, p. 238). Indeed, Morocco is a pioneering Arab nation in the adoption of language diversity officially (Maarouf, 2012). The reportedly indigenous language is eventually ratified and endorsed as a substratum of the Moroccan identity and culture.

### French

Admittedly, the French language is still dominating the Moroccan linguistic scene in the key spheres such as the economy, the administration, and higher non-scientific education. Undeniably, French is the predominant language of instruction in commercial, scientific, and technological majors in both private and public institutes of higher education all over the Kingdom. In his investigation of the language attitudes in Morocco, Marley (2004) sets forth that French is "the language of science and technology in much of higher education" (p. 31). The language takes over national and international languages and maintains the status of the medium of instruction in the Moroccan universities. The colonial period as well as the firm economic and cultural bonds with the French Republic have been major pillars upholding the position of French in, especially education. In this respect, Sadiqi's (1991) study concedes that the French language has formed, over the time, a cultural legacy that is enshrined in Moroccan cultural texture. In effect, French has been able to hold out against the tense language competition in multilingual Morocco and maintains its leading roles in many fields. Yet, from another perspective, the French language is still negatively viewed by considerable faction of the Moroccan society due to its colonial associations, according to Sadiqi (1991). Sadiqi argues that "French has inevitably been considered a symbol of political and cultural dependence" (p. 111). Moroccans generally hold a negative view of French following the colonial period Morocco has undergone in the first part of the twentieth century.

### Spanish

Two major colonising powers have shared the Moroccan territories during the first half of the last century. While France was dominating the major medial parts of the country, Spanish authorities have been occupying its northern and southern

<sup>1</sup>مباشرة معكم (A Live Debate!) is a weekly TV debate programme which gathers experts to discuss a particular social or political issue of public concern, broadcast on Morocco's 2<sup>nd</sup> channel 2M and animated by Journalist Jamaa Goulahcen)

areas, especially in the Moroccan Sahara region<sup>2</sup>. Ergo, in addition to French, the Spanish language has been nourished and eventually become an important language in Morocco (Daniel & Ball, 2009; Zouhir, 2013), especially in the north, where its traces are still evident nowadays as several Spanish words constitute a part and parcel of the laymen's communication (Sayahi, 2004). Hence, though the Spanish have left Morocco long time ago, the Spanish language still constitutes an important component in Morocco's language diversity nowadays (Zouhir, 2013), to a lesser degree than French, though. Apart from education, where Spanish has been, for long, a foreign language taught in the public secondary schools and universities, the official television has been broadcasting news bulletin in Spanish, which is the only language used for this purpose alongside French and the national official languages. This showcases the significance of the Spanish language in Morocco, not only as a remnant of bygone Spanish occupation, but rather as a component of the history and the tongue of a geographically neighbouring nation with common cultural, economic, and political interests (Chahhou, 2014; Sayahi, 2004). The Spanish language teaching and cultural institutes strewn all over Morocco show that this language has been a real ingredient in the Moroccan rich linguistic arena.

### English

In addition to the aforementioned languages, English is, at present, a major component of the Moroccan language system. This international language has been gaining ground very rapidly in Morocco, especially throughout the opening years of the new millennium. According to Sadiqi (2006), English has been "the fastest growing language in Morocco" (p. 3). This massive increase is manifest in education in particular, where, more and more students are opting to study the English language at the State's schools and universities. Studies (El Kirat El Allame *et al.*, 2010; Bendouqi *et al.*, 2010) report that the highest number of university registered students is concentrated in the departments of English, which implies that learning English is becoming very popular in today's Moroccan Higher Education. Ergo, to cater for the increasing demand for the learning of English as well as provide employment for this major's graduates, the State has been employing more and more English language teachers along the past years (Buckner, 2011). Apparently, the English language is admittedly gaining ground over the language landscape. Thus, at the official level, English has seemingly won recognition along the skyrocketing numbers of its learners. In this respect, Zouhir (2013) notes that Moroccan educational policy makers have granted essential importance to the English language, which is apparently meant to meet the increasing demand for its instruction. English is the present-day language of employment, the economy, tourism, international banking, Higher Education, and for access to texts of different disciplines (Hyde, 1994). In effect, authorities as well as the public in Morocco have become cognizant of the value of English in today's globalising world. Being a non-colonial foreign language in Morocco, seems to have protected it against the locals' negative attitudes. Sadiqi (2006) reports that English was introduced in Morocco during the course of World War II as The United States was intending to take part in the

conflict underway in Europe then. The author adds that "the presence of English has been greatly enhanced by tourism, the movies, music, and now Globalization". Sadiqi claims that "nowadays, English has supplanted Spanish in economy and education, and is competing with French in education", which made it "the fastest growing language in Morocco" (p. 3). Undeniably, promoting English in Morocco has been an uncomplicated process and the language makes up a core ingredient of the language system today.

### Conclusion

The aforementioned languages all constitute the main ingredients of Morocco's linguistic and cultural plurality. Zouhir (2013) argues that "the contemporary language situation in Morocco is marked by the use of Standard Arabic, MA, Berber, French, Spanish, and English", before concluding that "the Moroccan language situation is characterized by complexity, and it is socially and culturally diverse" (p. 275). Irrespective of the factors that came into play to yield a subsequently complex language situation, Morocco's multilingual situation is plain fact. Tomašik, (2010) goes along with Zouhir (2013) and affirms that "this linguistic and cultural variation has made Morocco a perfect example to study multilingualism and language policy issues" (p. 3). Consequently, after a prolonged duality, not to say rivalry, between Modern Standard Arabic and French, other rising languages such as English and Amazigh are marking a paradigm shift in policymaking. The Arabic and Islamic culture, coupled with ancient Amazigh existence, in addition to the European occupation and, finally, the advent of globalization, have all left a rich linguistic heritage marked by co-existence at times and tensions at other times. By and large, "multilingualism in Morocco has been the accumulative outcome of the various cultural and linguistic traces left by the European and Middle Eastern intrusion in the country" (Elboubekri, 2013, p. 1930). The linguistic diversity of Morocco is, in the main, a result of historical succession of different races and ethnicities which came to settle, occupy the lands, and build civilisations. Morocco is nowadays an archetype of linguistically diverse countries and an outstanding icon of linguistic and cultural pluralism. From casual communication, to the media, education, the administration, business, etc, languages in Morocco fulfil different functions, and this variation puts the State's language policy in a precarious situation.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish has, however, lost ground after the Green March in 1975, as French has been imposed as the first foreign language. Indeed, Saharaouis have lost proficiency in the language and the use of Spanish in both the North and Southern regions is very limited.

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