Mother Tongues and Academic Language: A Quantitative & Qualitative Approach to Darija in Morocco

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Abstract. This article investigates the presence of academic language features, widely referred to as Academic Register, that qualify the language of schooling in Darija, one of the mother tongues in Morocco mainly used for everyday communication and informal contexts. An important body of literature reveals that the home register considerably differs from the school register in many respects [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6], among others. Scholars argue that early exposure to the characteristics of academic language at home is a prerequisite for the children’s success in the academic environments [4, 7]. An examination of the precursors of the academic language features occurring in early mother-child interactions was undertaken. The theoretical framework adopted is based on systemic functional linguistics and is informed by research on the language of school to assess mother-child interactions in two different tasks and in two different measurement times at home. The DASH coding scheme was used and the CLAN was involved in running the frequencies of the occurrence of each feature, namely the non-present talk (decontextualized language) at the textual level, and open-ended questions and assertives at the socio-pragmatic level. The results showed that Darija includes the features of the academic register though to varying degrees. Thus, the low status of Darija and its use in the informal contexts, does not seem to influence the existence of academic register in it. The differences in the children’s performance in the study were mainly related to the family’s socioeconomic status (SES) and home literacy practices. Consequently, Darija was found to be like any other Standard language.

Keywords. Darija; Academic register; Home register; Home literacy practices; Textual level; Socio-pragmatic Level; SES; Mother’s literacy; Systemic functional linguistics.

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1. Introduction

When children start school, they get exposed to a new language register which differs from the register they use in everyday interactions in many respects. They are also expected to take part in situations that require the use of these features in an unfamiliar language that differs from their mother tongue. This is imposed by the diglossic situation in Morocco, a linguistic reality that imposes the use of Darija at home and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) at school. Studies show that teachers expect children to present themselves as an authority on a specific topic and provide conventionally structured information without recourse to shared situational knowledge since their first days at school [4]. The display of knowledge in the school context requires, in addition to the technical and specific vocabulary used in complex structures to generate a specific connected discourse, an abstract language that may rely on situational clues for eliciting the communicative situation. However, not all children are equally prepared to produce such a language. Indeed, while some children come to school well-prepared for coping with the challenges imposed by the school based mainly on their communicative experiences with their families; others, with less exposure to academic register in their home environments, are very likely to encounter difficulties dealing with this new form of register. One of the academic features children make use of at school may be related to the language input they receive from their parents at home [7], which can positively impact their schooling. The underlying assumption is that the type of input, both in quality and quantity, children are exposed to at an early age may either help to stimulate or hinder the children’s academic language development. A number of factors may account for the differences in the type of language input parents use with their children. These factors depend mainly on the parents socio-economic status (SES) and the mother’s level of literacy, which may affect the home literacy activities involved in the whole process of the children’s language development. Some recent studies within the framework of the usage-based approach have stressed the importance of input in the early language acquisition process [8, 9, 10]. The present study examines the development of the language of schooling of two Moroccan children in interactive situations with their mothers in a Picture-book telling activity, a structured task, and a free conversation activity, the unstructured task, at home.

Academic language register (ALR) can be defined as the use of language for specific, decontextualized, and cognitively demanding communication in the school-like tasks [7]. Different apppellations have been used to refer to it, namely the language of education [3], the language of schooling [4]; cognitive academic language proficiency [2, 11, 12, 13]; academic language [5, 6]; among others. ALR is mainly characterized by richness, variety, density, complexity, specificity, explicitness, decontextualization, etc. These characteristics are the units of research called Levels and features [14], investigated in the present study.

The main objective of the present study is to examine the degree of presence of the features of the school language, i.e. AR in the home input and output of Monolingual Moroccan children at the textual and the socio-pragmatic levels across tasks and over time. The study also accounts for the variations in the input and output concerned in terms of the social factors, namely SES, the mother’s educational level, and the home literacy activities, in the light of systemic functional linguistics.

The study addressed and tried to answer the three following questions:
1. What type and amount of communicative features of academic language register (ALR) input do the two Moroccan mothers provide their children with in the different tasks and different measurement times?

2. What type and amount of communicative features of the academic language register (ALR) do the children’s output reveal in terms of task and time?

3. What effect do the family’s SES, the mothers’ educational background, and home literacy practices— as a mediating factor— have on the two children’s academic language development?

2. Research Methodology

The study adopted a mixed approach combining both the quantitative and qualitative approaches. It made use of a non-experimental research design, ex post facto, repeated measurement research design for the quantitative part of the study with the aim to describe and emphasize the linguistic variables found in the home input and output. It also compares the generated statistical results to allow interpretation.

The study relied on a questionnaire, which was devised to gather the static information that served for computing some of the independent variables used in the study, elicit information about language choices and preferences in the home environment, which is relevant for gaining insight into the home linguistic environment of the child, and collect information about the family home literacy practices which are considered a mediating factor for the child’s language development. These literacy activities were scored and calculated and the scores served in the selection of the two families with the lowest and the highest scores. The objective was to find out about the nature of the language used and the elicitation styles that are likely to occur at homes where no or little literacy activities are practiced and where school type practices usually take place.

The interaction tasks involved two activities that relied on suitable material and well-chosen questions compatible with each age group, a structured activity and a free activity. The structured activity involved a book-picture telling; while the spontaneous or free activity involved free conversation. The mother-child interactions took place in two measurement times; the first one (T1) was in January while the second measurement (T2) was conducted at the end of June, almost six months later. This was done deliberately with the aim to track the development of ALR over time. Therefore, the main objective of relying on two activities and two measurement times (T1 and T2) was to determine the performance of both the mothers and children in the two tasks and find out about the mothers’ input and the children’s output in different tasks, at different times, and in different home environments in terms of home literacy practices.

The study relied on both independent and dependent variables. The independent variables included the:

- Non-computed: time, task, and Mothers’ literacy level.
- Computed variables: SES and home literacy practices.

The dependent variables included mainly

- Present talk: Proportions of matching and selecting (textual/abstract levels).
- Non-present talk: including proportions of reordering and reasoning (textual/abstract levels).
- Assertive, directives, open-ended questions, closed questions (speech acts: Socio-pragmatic level)
- Children’s academic language composite: computing all proportions of the academic features (non-present talk + Assertives + open-ended questions) produced during their interactions with their mothers in both tasks and in the two measurement times.
- Mothers’ academic composite: computing all proportions of the academic features (non-present talk + Assertives + open-ended questions) produced during their interactions with their children in both tasks and in the two measurement times.

The study involved 2 children and their respective mothers from a sample of 18 children who participated in an in-depth study. The choice of the two families was based on the computed scores the children got in relation to the home literacy practices, which were found to highly correlate with the ALR (Mothers’ academic composite and Children’s academic language composite) revealed by both mothers (r = .31) and children (r = .39) respectively. Actually, the 2 children with the highest and the lowest scores were selected along with their mothers for the study so as to reveal the discrepancies between the two families, account for the differences, and unveil the factors behind such performance.

The corpora generated from the video-recorded of mother-child interactions in both tasks and both measurement times were processed following the steps described below:

(i) Transcription: CHAT transcription system (Codes for the Human Analysis of Transcripts);
(ii) Coding: DASH coding system in CLAN (Child Language Analysis);
(iii) Generating frequencies: using CLAN;
(iv) Transporting the frequencies for numerical and descriptive analysis: R language;
(v) Inferential Analysis: R language.
(vi) Qualitative analysis: using quantitative findings to compare the ALR used in two home linguistic environments.

3. Results and findings

After running quantitative statistics, many variables were computed allowing for a qualitative comparison of the home literacy practices of Duaa, the child with the lowest score, and Kenza, the child with the highest score.

Duaa was a 4 years and one-month old young learner who was studying in the Middle Section (Moyenne Section, (MS)) at the time of data collection. Her mother had no education and no job. Her father had a Mid-high level of education, and was a mechanic. The only language that both parents and siblings were using with Duaa was Darija, even when conducting some home literacy activities with her. When the score for home literacy
practices was computed, Duaa got the lowest score rated by the whole group of the children participating in the major study.

When the data analysis and the scores for non-present talk, the assertives and the open-ended questions used in mother-child interactions were computed, Duaa and her mother’s proportion of use of academic language register (ALR) were as reported in Table (1) below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Non-present talk</th>
<th>Assertives</th>
<th>Open-ended questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duaa/child</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A close look at the scores reported in table (1) above reveal that Duaa was much better in the use of the features of the academic language register than her mother. She produced higher proportions of non-present talk and assertives with (2.13) and (.87) respectively, compared to her mother’s scores which were 1.31 and .00, respectively. However, Duaa used more open-ended questions than her mother did, with 3.65 for 3.46. This implies that the child was continuously in need of help, which the mother could not offer, as she was illiterate. Therefore, Duaa was still a dependent learner seeking continuous assistance.

Kenza, a 6 years and 9 months old young learner, who studied in the Preparatory grade (Classe Préparatoire (CP)) grade. Her mother had a high educational background, she is a Ph.D. holder, and the headmistress of the kindergarten in her parents’ scholar group. Kenza’s father had a high educational level as well and was a manager. Kenza was exposed to namely Amazigh and Darija, the two mother tongues in Morocco, in addition to French and English, the main foreign languages in use. Her mother claimed that the child was not fluent in both mother tongues, especially Amazigh. Kenza’s in the tasks reveals her great involvement in home literacy activities her parents, her siblings and her grandparents offered to her. Based on the information collected in the questionnaire, the child was exposed to all the aforementioned languages at different degrees. When the score for the home educational practices was computed, Kenza’s score was 56, the highest score rated by the participating children in the main study. When the scores for non-present talk, assertives and open-ended questions were calculated, Kenza and her mother got the rates reported in Table (2).

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>1,11</td>
<td>00</td>
<td>3,83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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A careful examination of table (2) above reveals that though the child’s production in the proportions of non-present talk and assertives were higher than those of her mother with 2.72 and 1.71, and 1.11 and .00, for each one of them and for each task respectively. Kenza produced less open-ended questions than her mother did, with 2.87 for 3.83. This reveals that the child required less help and assistance. Indeed, Kenza’s mother asked more open-ended questions during the task to elicit her child’s knowledge and encourage her to produce more assertives. By doing so, Kenza's mother positioned her child as a knowledgeable partner for exposing her knowledge.

In order to unveil the main differences in the two children’s ALR, Table (3) below presents a comparison between the two children to help gain a deep insight into the study, understand the results, and offer a detailed interpretation.

**Table 3:** Duaa and Kenza’s scores for the use of the features of academic language register

<table>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duaa/child</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>3.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenza/child</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td>1.71</td>
<td>2.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A close analysis of the scores in table (3) reveals that Kenza is a better producer of the ALR than Duaa as Kenza outscores Duaa in performing non-present talk; therefore, demonstrating her less dependence on the context and the perceivable environment using “reordering” of the information and “reasoning”, which are the highest levels in “de-contextualization”, one of the most important components that features the language of schooling, while interacting with her mother. In addition, Kenza produced many more assertives than Duaa, revealing that Kenza was continuously asked open-ended questions that fostered her to produce assertives, the major element of an academic conversational style that involves knowledge elicitation. This also explains why Kenza produced less open-ended questions than Duaa. Indeed, while Kenza seemed to be a knowledge producer and revealed her autonomy, Duaa asked many questions soliciting help from her mother to direct her along the interactions. This shows that Duaa was in a controlled conversational style that made of her a dependent learner in a continuous need for help.

As regards non-present talk, Duaa’s mother was able to produce this type of talk more than Kenza’s mother did, with 1.31 for 1.11, respectively; while Kenza used more non-present talk than Duaa with 2.72 for 2.13, respectively. This may imply that the topic of discussion was well chosen in both situations that may have determined the choice of the type of language to be used, i.e. a special register. Yet, Kenza’s mother encouraged her daughter to speak more and supported her to make use of a higher rate of decontextualized language than herself.
Concerning the assertives, though both mothers produced .00 proportion, they are not alike because Duaa’s mother produced less open-ended questions than her daughter. This implies that the mother is not playing the role of positioning her child as an authority to display knowledge. This can be due to her illiteracy or her non familiarity with the role she has to play as she scarcely used literacy activities with her daughter. Kenza, on the other hand seems to experience an opposite situation as her mother produced more open-ended questions to give an opportunity for her child to display her knowledge.

Regarding the use of open-ended questions, Kenza's mother scored higher, with 3.83, than Duaa's mother whose score was 3.46; while Kenza rated less than Duaa, with 2.87 for 3.65. These results reveal that Kenza was more immersed in the school-like context than Duaa. In fact, Kenza’s mother fostered her child’s knowledge more through using questions requiring critical thinking and problem-solving strategies. Kenza, on the other hand, used less open-ended questions, which shows that she depends less on her mother. This can lead to conclude that Kenza has the language abilities of an autonomous learner.

4. Conclusion

The present study examined an important facet of the child’s language development, namely academic register. The approach adopted, which was both quantitative and qualitative, helped to cater for the influential factors that stimulate or hinder the development of the child’s communicative features and academic register. The results revealed that Darija, like any other language, does include academic language features. This clearly appeared in the input and output of the participants in the study whose productions included real examples of academic register to varying degrees. The data analysis and interpretation unveiled the impact of the family’s Socio-Economic Status, the home literacy practices, and, to a lesser degree, the mothers’ literacy level. The socio-pragmatic level appeared as the major factor difference between the two families.

References


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