

Language, Ethnicity and Identity

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Abstract

This article addresses the sensitive issue of the relationship between language, ethnicity and identity in the Moroccan context. The fact that Morocco is a multilingual country imposes a reconsideration of the way to deal with this multilingualism in relation to ethnic and national identity. The point in question is how should language planners deal with this linguistic and ethnic diversity? From exploratory historical and sociolinguistic perspectives, we discuss the way the French coloniser dealt with this issue. The strong resistance of Moroccans to the coloniser led the French to concoct a way to divide them so that they can rule them properly and easily. Hence, in 1930 the “Amazigh decree” was imposed by the coloniser who feared the continuous spread of Arabic and Islam, which constituted unifying factors of the Moroccan society. Consequently, “Amazigh-French schools” were established where Amazigh teachers would teach Amazigh students French with no intermediary language. Moreover, the Amazigh “common law” was consolidated to counter-attack the Islamic one. All in all, the coexistence of many languages and varieties in the Moroccan linguistic map raises identity issues that need to be reckoned with in any future Moroccan language planning policy. Therefore, we consider it a nationalist way of dealing with the problem through the full acknowledgement of the Amazigh and Arab cultures and identities to foster a way to benefit from the richness of both cultures to achieve a national unity within this cultural and ethnic diversity.

Key words: Language, Ethnicity, Identity, Arabization

In human sciences, different approaches - the psychological and sociological ones are cases in point- took the onus of examining the concept of *identity*. This concept is paradoxical. Indeed, the term *identity* has its origin in the Latin root, idem, meaning ‘the same’. However, *identity* stands for both similarity and difference. On the one hand, *identity* reflects the uniqueness of an individual. It distinguishes him/her from others. On the other hand, it reminds the same individual of a relationship within a given extended group. *Identity* maybe also related to nation, religion, culture, gender etc., implying that it involves the characteristics that we share with others. Therefore, an individual struggles to perform the difficult task of being unique and seeking identification with others. Besides this, *identity* is not only related to personal growth but also to very serious matters related to the fight for survival for self-determination in many parts of the world (Buckingham, 2008).

According to Stets and Burke (2000), the basis of *identity* is the category or the group and the role that an individual plays within a given collectivity. The authors distinguish *identity theory* from *social identity theory*. The two theories are used to talk about *identity formation*. This process is named respectively *identification* and *self-categorization* according to the above-mentioned theories. In short, the individual tends to classify him/herself in relation to other social groups. Through a process of comparison, the individual identifies those s/he believes to be similar to him/her and considers them the *in-group* and differentiates him/herself from those s/he believes to be dissimilar to him/her and considers them the *out-group*. The consequence of such an *identification* or *self-categorisation* is the accentuation of similarities with the in-group. A case in point is the overuse of the retroflex approximant /r/ sound instead of the alveolar trill /R/ by speakers, especially women, who believe themselves to be, or would like to be, identified with the Fassi community as a marker of an in-group language characteristic to differentiate themselves from the other speech communities in the Moroccan context.

Laroche, Pons and Richard (2009) remark that the concept of *ethnic identity* or *ethnicity* is examined by many cultural researchers. *Ethnic identity* is identified as retention of characteristics of an individual culture of origin unveiled through the individual’s attitudes, values or behaviours. Therefore, *ethnic identity* is the outcome of an individual’s feeling that s/he belongs or identifies with given ethnic groups. Furthermore, *ethnic identity* includes many cultural indicators or markers used to link an individual with given collectivities. One

of the most important indicators of ethnic identity is *language*. Indeed, in the Moroccan context, the mastery of Arabic and Amazigh distinguishes respectively two distinct ethnic groups, namely Arabs and Amazigh.

Wakefield and Hudley (2007) make a distinction between *race* and *ethnicity*. *Race* stands for shared physical characteristics like the colour of the skin, which leads to a social distinction or even discrimination. *Ethnicity* may be the result of either a feeling or a belief that one belongs to an ethnic group sharing some features such as language, culture, etc.

The Mother tongues in Morocco

The Amazigh varieties

The rapid expansion of Islam in Morocco did not correlate with that of Arabic. In many remote geographical areas, Islamization did not mean Arabization. The varied geographical configuration of Morocco was an important natural factor in the preservation of the Amazigh entity. While they have been arabized in the plains, the Amazigh have been able to preserve their vernaculars and customs up to now in the mountains (Chami, 1987).

In the 'Encyclopaedia of Islam' (1960), it is stated that Arabs represent 10 to 15% of the population, whereas the Arabized Amazigh make up about 40 to 45%. The remaining population is Amazigh speakers (In Chami, *ibid.*). Nonetheless, anyone can remark that the number of Amazigh population speaking Arabic is on the rise thanks to the movement of population, the establishment of schools in remote areas and intermarriage between Arabs and Amazigh.

There is much controversy among dialectologists concerning the historical origins of the Amazigh language. Chafik (1976) puts forward the hypothesis that the Amazigh language is genetically related to Arabic, whereas Boukous (1979) denies that link (In Chami, *ibid.*). Likewise, Grandguillaume (1983) refutes any genetic link between Classical Arabic and the Amazigh varieties, as the latter have totally different phonology, grammar, syntax and vocabulary. In addition, there is no mutual intelligibility between them.

The dialectal variations within the Amazigh language are correlated mostly with geographical specificity, namely mountains. The exclusion of the Amazigh varieties in the mountains was not accidental, as it was due to the Arab conquest when the Amazigh took

refuge in those inaccessible areas. Indeed, the Amazigh varieties are up to now subsisting as a distinguishing Amazigh cultural component (Abbassi, 1977).

There is a general agreement among linguists and non-professionals alike that there are three distinct Amazigh varieties in Morocco:

A) Tarifit: spoken by the tribes dwelling in the Rif mountains.

B) Tamazight: spoken in the Central and Eastern Middle Atlas.

C) Tachelhit: spoken in the Central and Western High Atlas, in the Sous region and the Low Atlas Mountains.

In the 'Grand Larousse Encyclopédique' (1968), the Amazigh language is presented as being constituted of many varieties with slight differences and many common points; claiming that they are varieties of a single idiom, a plausible one. On the one hand, (Hammoud, 1982) remarks that they are mutually intelligible (In Elbiad, 1985). On the other, argues that there is a great divergence between Tamazight and Tachelhit and a greater divergence between Tamazight and Tarifit and even greater divergence between Tachelhit and Tarifit. This is mainly due to geographical proximity. In fact, possible contact and intelligibility would be expected between people living in proximate regions.

The syntax and morphology are almost the same in all the three varieties, while the phonic system presents some evolutions, which end up by hiding the original uniformity of the vocabulary. Many words had fallen into desuetude in the regions that were much under the Arab influence and had been replaced by Arabic borrowed terms (Chami, *ibid.*).

The principal 'handicap' of the Amazigh varieties was the fact that they were deprived of a graphic system. Recently, Amazigh-speaking intellectuals, through the 'Royal institute of the Amazigh culture', rehabilitated the 'Tifinagh': the ancient Amazigh alphabet. The adoption of this alphabet would allow the Amazigh varieties to be more than mere vernaculars of a culture, which is orally based and transmitted. Moreover, the Amazigh varieties are regaining dynamism explained by the impulsion given to the literary, artistic and linguistic production despite previous unfavourable political conditions. Indeed, the creation of 'The Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture' in Morocco confirms this idea. This was crowned by the constitutional recognition of the Amazigh language as another official and national language to officially acknowledge the plurality of the rich and united Moroccan identity, in the heart of which stands the Amazigh language, the common heritage of all Moroccans.

The domains in which the Amazigh varieties are used are generally limited to the confines of homes and among Amazigh speakers. They practise their Islamic religious rituals in Arabic. Consequently, the relationship between Arabic and religion positions the Amazigh

varieties in a lower rank even by Amazigh speakers. Nowadays, though the *Tifinagh* is taught, Classical Arabic alphabet is still used to write Amazigh for personal letters between close friends and family members.

The various Amazigh varieties are the vehicle of the Amazigh culture expressed via songs, legends, poems, proverbs, etc., which can spread from one Amazigh village to another. Thanks to the establishment of the Amazigh Academy in France in 1967, the Amazigh language has been revived (Ennaji, 1991). In Morocco, the Amazigh language is included progressively in education and in mass media.

According to (Ennaji, *ibid.*), the continuous decline of the Amazigh varieties is due to three main reasons. The first one is the quick rate of urbanisation since 1960, which has its share in the regression of their use since Amazigh speakers feel that Moroccan Arabic is more useful to them in trade and transaction than any other variety. The second reason is the school system in which Arabic is the main medium of instruction. The more Amazigh speakers will go to school, the lesser they will use their own varieties. The Final reason is clear while discussing a scientific topic; it is unusual and inadequate to use the Amazigh varieties, which lack appropriate terminology. This was the result of historical events, which placed the cultural and technological expansion under the patronage of the Arabic-speaking population. However, despite that apparent regression of the Amazigh language, it has been able to keep its vitality, as it is still the language of home and friendship.

Moroccan Arabic

Moroccan Arabic (henceforth MA) is the mother tongue of all Moroccans who are not Amazigh speakers. It is genetically related to Classical Arabic. It is orally transmitted, as it has not been standardised. Geographically speaking, researchers distinguish three types of MA: the Urban, Rural and Bedouins varieties. Abbassi (*ibid.*) remarks that speakers of MA are essentially living in cities, plains and to a lesser extent in mountains. He points out the dialectal variations within MA that have coincided with geographical locations. Outside the Amazigh areas in the Rif and Atlas Mountains, he divides MA into two major types: an urban and a rural type. Within the urban variety, he maintains that there are three major linguistic varieties corresponding to the Northern, Central and Southern regions of Morocco, while the rural MA can be found in the areas surrounding the cities. Nowadays, because of the massive rural emigrations towards towns, urban speech continuously influences the rural one.

Anybody who is competent in one of the given varieties can automatically communicate with speakers of other varieties. Mutual intelligibility is, in general, possible among those varieties, which constitute what is referred to as MA.

Chami (1987) compares MA and Classical Arabic (henceforth CA) in the following way. From the phonological, morphological and syntactic point of view, there are fewer divergences, as there are many affinities between MA and CA. As regards the lexicon, it is evident that they share a lot though MA is full of borrowed terms, besides the fact that it is regionally influenced. In general, an illiterate Arabophone is able to globally understand a speech delivered in CA. Indeed, there is no total separation between MA and CA.

MA and Amazigh varieties are the mother tongues of Moroccans. Since CA is the official language in the country, the Amazigh speakers make the necessary effort to acquire MA, which is largely used in towns. Consequently, the Arabic-Amazigh bilingualism is related mainly to the Amazigh-speaking populations. An Arabophone will rarely make the effort to learn Amazigh since s/he does not feel it of any real use. This linguistic situation has previously pushed many politicians and university teachers working in cultural associations to denounce the marginalization of the Amazigh language as being contradictory to the process of democratisation of the social and political life in Morocco (Chami, *ibid.*).

Ferguson (1959) states that one of the characteristics of colloquial Arabic is its lack of orthography; although MA has some kind of written folk literature in the form of songs, proverbs etc., that body of written literature is very limited to guarantee any significance to the written form of that vernacular.

As all unwritten varieties, MA is largely stigmatised to the extent that a person who knows only that variety is considered as illiterate. Since it is not taught at school, it is regarded as lower in rank than CA. This particular negative attitude is a reflection of the general attitude toward dialectal Arabic in all Arab countries. This was clear in the international conference on Arabization held in Tripoli in 1975, which urged Arab governments to stop using dialectal Arabic as a medium of artistic expression (Ennaji, 1991). MA functions as the mother tongue, par excellence, through which the feelings of all Arabophones in Morocco are expressed. It is to be noted that MA is their vehicle of socialisation from early childhood to adulthood (Grandguillaume, 1983).

Language, ethnicity and identity

Language is an important element in defining *ethnicity*. The mastery of the language of another ethnic group is triggered by a myriad of incentives. In the case of Amazigh people, the acquisition of Arabic is attributed to many of the already mentioned causes. The most important one is the vitality of Arabic that makes of it a privileged means of communication among Moroccans.

Identity is not a homogeneous entity. Indeed, as long as we are living, we can create new identities depending on many subjective social, historical, economic and other factors. Identities can be established in many ways. So, language and identity are interrelated. In fact, language reflects partly our identity or to a larger extent, language is itself an act of identity. Language is the manifest behaviour that permits the categorisation of an individual as a member of a given group (Tabouret-Keller, 2007). Therefore, those who speak the same or different language give birth to respectively the “us” and “others” categorization. In fact, self-identification is possible relying on language connected issues such as family or first names. For example, in Morocco having the family name ‘Fassi’ suggests that this person belongs or wants to identify with the ‘Fassi’ community. Moreover, we can identify ourselves with different groups in society. In addition, using first names from a given language is a clear sign of belongingness to a given group. Indeed, the use of some Amazigh first names such as /tilila/ suggests that the named person has Amazigh origins. Interestingly, it is the norm rather than the exception to find Amazigh families giving Arabic names to their children, but the other way round is not true. This is partly due to the Moroccan administration that stipulates that accepting Amazigh names needs to be in conformity with the “allowed list of names” of the ministry of the interior (Oumada, 2011). It is justifiable to remind that this list was promulgated for a short time from 1996 to 2002ⁱ. Nonetheless, many of the Amazigh population accept willingly to give their children Arabic names as a clear sign of their identification with the Islamic Moroccan nation. Consequently, Islam constitutes a unifying element between Arabs and Amazigh in Morocco. As already mentioned, it is common for Amazigh speakers to acquire Arabic while Arabs rarely make the effort to acquire any of the Amazigh varieties. This linguistic situation reveals the prestige endowed to Arabic, the language of the Koran. However this situation has started to be balanced in the (2011) Moroccan constitution. In its preamble, it is stipulated that Morocco is a state with a rich diversity constituted of the Arab-Islamic, Amazigh, Saharro-Hassani, Andalous, Hebrew components but an undivided rich identityⁱⁱ. The fact that before the constitution of 2011, Arabic was stated as the only national and official language of Morocco; this linguistic situation had created a feeling of inferiority among Amazigh speakers.

Therefore, it was legitimate that the Moroccan constitution should acknowledge the presence of the Amazigh language and culture, which undoubtedly reflects the diversity and richness of the Moroccan identity. Interestingly, it is noticed overlapping affiliations in different groups. As an illustration, an Amazigh speaker, for example, would identify with the Amazigh, the Moroccan and the Muslim groups.

The coloniser's Amazigh policy

The strong resistance of Moroccans led the colonisers to think of a way to divide them in order to rule them properly, hence what is referred to as the "French Amazigh's policy". The circular letter sent by the Marshal Lyautey in June 16, 1921 clearly illustrates the coloniser's 'fear' or 'suspicion' from the Arabic language. Therefore, Lyautey (ibid.) associates the learning of Arabic with the spread of Islam. Besides, this language can be learnt via the Koran, while the goal of the French was to modernise the Amazigh outside the framework of Islam. Therefore, Lyautey (ibid.) made it clear that linguistically speaking they should teach the Amazigh to switch directly from the Amazigh language to the French one.

The same is true for (Marty, 1925) The French commander who talks about the need to create French-Amazigh schools; in other words, schools in which Amazigh children will be gathered to receive solely French-training. Marty's proposal was to exclude any usage of Arabic, interference of the 'fkih'ⁱⁱⁱ or any Islamic presence to block the continuous spread of Islam among the remote Amazigh tribes. He adds that appointing Arab teachers in Amazigh's 'land' constitutes a real danger to the coloniser. These Arab teachers, according to him, will use Arabic in daily interaction with the Amazigh population and will, either consciously or unconsciously, spread Islam. In this way the French school becomes like a religious Islamic centre thanks to the Arabic language, which is the medium used in the spread of Islam.

He argues that the problem of education in the 'land' of Amazigh will not be solved unless they use Amazigh teachers exclusively. Their slogan was 'education for the Amazigh and by the Amazigh'. At the end, he declared the end of the French army conquest and the onset of a spiritual one. In the latter new 'weapons' will be used namely, the French language and thought.

The French policy towards the Amazigh is also clear (Gaudefroy-Demombynes, 1928). The writer stresses the fact that Morocco is the country of Amazigh. He states that the process of Islamization hence Arabization must be stopped because the coloniser would not accept the continuous spread of the Arabic language to the detriment of the French one. Consequently, he opts for a reactionary policy with the final goal of the French language supplanting both the Arabic and Amazigh languages. This policy would be followed by the consolidation of the Amazigh's institutions. Their aim was to counterattack any possible bloc of Moroccan population with one language and one institution; this could be achieved by teachers who would use French as a means of instruction with no resort whatsoever to Arabic.

Piquet (1925) also stresses the fact that the question of the law of customs is indispensable since the Amazigh have their common law /azraf/, which has no link with the koranic law. It is natural in his opinion to support this common law and even try to fill its potential gaps with an Amazigh or French spirit, since they would not accept to let the koranic law gain anymore ground. Yet, he remarks the embarrassing situation of the apparent supremacy of the koranic law compared to the old and original Amazighs' laws.

Leglay (1921), the officer at the Inquiry French office in Morocco, was one of the fervent proponents of the French linguistic and educational policy during the French protectorate. He urged the colonisers to exploit the Amazigh who were, he believed, easy to dominate and direct according to the needs and benefits of the French.

He tried to convince the reader that the Amazigh's Islam was not deeply rooted and that the reminiscence of Christianity, Judaism and even Paganism were manifest in their customs and traditions. Yet, he seemed to ignore the fact that Islam has been in Morocco more than twelve centuries ago and that many great Islamic dynasties who ruled Morocco had Amazigh origins such as the ALmoravids (1055-1147) and the Almohads (1147-1269)^{iv}.

Leglay (ibid.) drew a dichotomy between the Amazigh living in the plains and those in the mountains. He believed that the former continued in their process of Islamization and Arabization while the latter remained far away from any real Islamic contact. Consequently, he added that they should develop the Amazigh dwelling in the mountains in French, the language that reflects the thoughts of the colonisers. Hence, the Amazigh would learn the French language to be controlled properly.

Henceforth, the coloniser had the huge task of establishing French schools in the Amazigh's regions. Concerning what should be taught to the Amazigh, Leglay (ibid.) suggested anything in French! It was apparent that the colonisers' aim was in no way to

educate the Amazigh. Their aim was to teach them the French language to ease the control over them. For this reason, he added that they should leave off any use of Arabic or giving even orders in Arabic to people compelled to understand and respond to them. Besides, they should desist from hiring jurisprudents from private mosques /zaouias/ in an attempt to hinder the expansion of Islam and Arabic. To achieve their purpose they should make available Amazigh translators for the supervising authorities. All in all, we remark the declared open war of the French coloniser against Islam and Arabic language that stand for the Moroccans' unity threatening the French complete control of the country.

Language planning and national identity

In contrast with what the French colonisers attempted to do in order to use Moroccans' ethnic and linguistic diversity to divide them, nowadays, decision-makers seem to be convinced that this diversity can, if well-exploited, strengthen the national unity. The first step was the constitutional acknowledgement of this ethnic and linguistic diversity. Indeed, the creation of the Royal Institute of the Amazigh culture in 2001 was a clear sign towards achieving this goal. In the Royal Dahir^v creating and organizing this institute, it is stated that one of its objectives is the preservation of the foundations of the Moroccan identity. This can be achieved via the acquiescence of the plurality of the national identity, which includes the Amazigh, Arab, sub-Saharan, African and Andalusian cultural components reflecting the richness of our identity. The concretisation of this political decision would lead to equality between all Moroccans irrespective of their ethnic origins; hence to a more democratisation of the Moroccan institutions.

The spread of Arabic was concomitant of the spread of Islam. The fact that Islam was revealed in Arabic made it quite natural that its spreading and preaching have been performed in Arabic. Hence, Islamization went hand in hand with Arabization. However, this is not always true as it is the case of many Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia etc, are up-to-now not Arabized.

The case of Arabization as ethnic assimilation is

/.../ a process whereby Arabized people mix with Arab populations through Islamization to a degree of total assimilation. The extreme case of total assimilation is when Arabization is achieved over a fairly short time at the ethnic, linguistic and cultural levels, that is, the assimilated individuals or people give up their identity and

adopt as theirs, Islam as a religion, Arabic as a language, social norms, traditions, dogmas as markers of their identity and origin.

(Elbiad, 1985: 76)

An example illustrating this quotation is the case mentioned by Leglay (ibid.) who cites Ibn Khaldoun talking about the Moroccan Amazigh tribe /žba:la/ who were completely islamized and arabized since the fourteenth century^{vi}.

The term ‘official’ language refers to a non-linguistic factor tied to the official governmental recognition of a given language. According to Garvin (1973), the term ‘national’ language has two meanings. The first is a neutral one denoting that a language serves the whole territory of a nation. The second is a more emotional one, which describes a language that functions as a national symbol. It is important to mention that a national language is often an official language while the opposite is not always true. Nowadays, we have two national and official languages in Morocco, namely Arabic and Amazigh. The recent acknowledgement of the Amazigh varieties as national varieties will contribute in the preservation of the rich Amazigh culture. The positive signs towards this acknowledgement can be summed up in three main initiatives; first, the introduction of the Amazigh language in the Moroccan educational system since 2003 and the start to teach this language to all Moroccan children irrespective of their ethnic origins. Second is the standardisation of a new language by linguists who tried to unify the different Amazigh varieties; finally, the creation of an Amazigh television channel launched in 2010.

Conclusion

Since Arabization is the language planning policy adopted, the Amazigh language stands for many people as a ‘threat’ to the Moroccan national unity. However, it is believed that the rehabilitation of the Amazigh language would in no way endanger the Moroccan unity. The latter relies on strong pillars such as Islam and a popular monarchy whose descendants have both Arab and Amazigh origins. Nonetheless, the Standardised Amazigh language suffers from a huge handicap. Many consider this language as a ‘laboratory’ language, with no native speakers or readers apart from its creators! In fact, speakers of the Amazigh varieties have to study this language in order to be familiar with it. Consequently, we have to wait for many generations so that we can have literate people in the Amazigh

language. Consequently, the success of this planning policy would rely more on fostering positive attitudes towards learning the Amazigh language. In fact, in any language planning policy in any educational system, language planners must take into account the attitudes of those who are likely to be affected. Consequently, decision-makers should either conform to the expressed attitudes of the target population or persuade that population about the legitimacy of such a policy. Anyway, knowledge about attitudes is basic in the formulation and implementation of a successful language planning policy.

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