An Overview of the Moroccan Sociolinguistic Situation

By:

Pr. Fathi Said
Faculty of Letters and Humanities Mohammedia

Abstract:

In this paper, I will talk about the current situation of multilingualism in Morocco and what is stipulated in the Moroccan Constitution. Then, I will move on to distinguish between OL vs. NL, de facto vs. de jure and touch on the related concepts of power vs. solidarity, on the one hand, and communication vs. identity. Finally, I will handle the case of Moroccan Berber varieties in the light of these concepts.

Keywords:

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to contend that the case of Moroccan Berber varieties has been clumsily managed. Instead of raising them to the status of National Languages and promoting their use and development, they are being synthesized into a new Standard Moroccan Berber to be considered as another Official Language.

In this paper, I will talk about the current situation of multilingualism in Morocco and what is stipulated in the Moroccan Constitution. Then, I will move on to distinguish between OL vs. NL, de facto vs. de jure and touch on the related concepts of power vs. solidarity, on the one hand, and communication vs. identity. Finally, I will handle the case of Moroccan Berber varieties in the light of these concepts.

CURRENT SITUATION

According to the latest official figures released by the HIGH COMMISSION OF PLANNING (HCP), there are 7 languages used in Morocco, which are, according to their number of users: Moroccan Arabic (91%), Tashelhit (14%), Tamazight (8%), Tarifit (4%) and Hassani (1%), together with French (32%) and Spanish (5%).

Therefore, 74% natively speak MA varieties and 26% natively speak MB varieties, of which 15% are bilingual and 11% are monolingual. For this reason, MA is a de facto NL, since it is the mother-tongue of the majority of Moroccans used for both communication and identity. My claim is to raise the MB varieties to the status of de jure NLs.

French is widely used in governmental institutions, mid-size and large companies, banking, finance, insurance, etc. French is taught as a mandatory language at all levels in school. Spanish is mostly spoken in Northern Morocco and the Saharan Provinces, both previously colonized by Spain.

If we consider the geographical distribution of MB varieties, we will notice that Tarifit is spoken in the Rif area in the north of the country and is the smallest Berber dialect in Morocco by number of speakers, 4%.

Tamazight is the second Berber language in Morocco with 8% of speakers is mainly used in the regions of the Middle Atlas and the High Atlas mountains.

Tashelhit is considered to be the most widely spoken with 14% as it covers all the southern region of Souss-Massa-Draa together with the Marrakesh-Haouz and Tadla-Azilal regions.

Other minor Berber dialects are also spoken in Morocco such as Senhaja and Ghomara dialects in the Rif mountains; the Figuig Shilha and Zenati in eastern Morocco.

After Morocco gained its independence in 1956, French and Standard Modern Arabic became the main languages of administration and education, causing the role of Spanish to decline.
However, Spanish remains commonly used in public discourse and Spanish-language television is still a common media in northern Morocco.

Now, let’s see what the language policy in the Moroccan Constitution is. Article 5 stipulates that Arabic (Standard Modern Arabic) remains the Official Language of the State, which works for the protection and the development of Arabic, as well as the promotion of its use.

\[\rightarrow\text{This means that Arabic is not fully implemented as the OL, after more than 60 years of political independence.}\]

Likewise, Berber constitutes an OL of the State, being common heritage of all Moroccans without exception.

An organic law defines the process of implementation of the official character of this language as well as the modalities of its integration into teaching and into the priority domains of public life, so that it may be permitted in time to fulfill its function as an OL.

The State works for the preservation of Hassani Arabic, as an integral component of the unified Moroccan cultural identity, as well as the protection of dialects and cultural expressions in Morocco.

Likewise, the State sees to the coherence of the language policy and national culture and to the learning and the mastery of foreign languages of greatest use in the world [English & French] as the tools of communication, integration and interaction with community of knowledge, and to be open to different cultures and contemporary civilizations.

A National Council of Languages and Moroccan Culture is created, charged with, namely, the protection and development of Arabic [SMA] and Berber [SMB] and of the diverse Moroccan cultural expressions, which constitute a genuine heritage and a source of contemporary inspiration. It subsumes all the institutions concerned with these domains [namely, IRCAM (Institut Royal de Culture Amazighe) and Office of Arabicization Coordination مكتب تنسيق التعريب]. An organic law defines its attributions, composition and the modalities of its functioning.

\[\rightarrow\text{Notice that this Council is charged with the protection and development of Standard Modern Arabic and Standard Moroccan Berber as OLs, not MA varieties and MB varieties, which are NLs.}\]

Six years after the 2011 Constitution, the organic law to define the process of implementation of the official character of Berber is still pending as well as the National Council of Languages and Moroccan Culture, which has not yet seen the light.

Language policies have always taken long to proceed in Morocco. After independence from the French and Spanish Protectorates in 1956, the State engaged in a process of Arabicization to gain political and economic independence as well as lay the foundations of an Arab-Islamic identity. In 2000, the Charter for Educational Reform introduced a drastic change in language policy that centered on three main axes:
- Improving and reinforcing the teaching of Standard Modern Arabic,
- Using a variety of languages, such as English and French in teaching the fields of science and technology,
- Recognition and acceptance of Berber as a National Language.

OFFICIAL VS. NATIONAL LANGUAGE

According to Fishman, J. (’74), in its language policy, a country needs to balance the concerns of both Nationalism, i.e. the feelings that develop from a sense of group identity and the concerns of Nationism, i.e. the practical concerns of governing.

Needles to remind ourselves that the main functions of any language are communication and identity. Language is what enables people to articulate things, ideas and attitudes in an intelligible form and transmit them to other people. Language also enables us to express who we think we are and how we are connected to other people.

The functions of communication and identity are intimately interwoven, and in each case language is the main means by which human beings carry out the crucial tasks of developing their understanding of the world, communicating with each other and negotiating their own place within the world, (Joseph, 2004).

In this regard, an OL serves the purpose of Nationism and is used as a tool for communication only. An OL is a symbol of power. On the other hand, a NL serves the purpose of Nationalism and is used as a tool for both identity and communication. A NL is a symbol of solidarity.

A NL is inherently a mother-tongue, a language that you acquire and that you use for both communication and identity, even if you are illiterate. On the other hand, an OL is a language that you learn at school, if you are literate and that you use only for communication, including reading and writing.

The ideal situation would be when the OL and NL are one language that serves the purposes of both Nationism and Nationalism and that symbolizes both power and solidarity. It is, then, a language that functions as a means for both communication and identity.

Throughout the world, very few countries have one language that can be considered as both official and national, because very few communities are linguistically homogeneous. This fact is due to ethnic, cultural and religious diversities that permeate such communities, together with people’s mobility and migration.

There are, however, some exceptional cases where the state recognizes only one official language at the national level, namely, Argentina, Cuba, France, Italy, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Thailand and Vietnam.

An OL can be de jure official or de facto official; likewise, a NL can be de jure national or de facto national. A de jure OL/NL is explicitly stipulated in the constitution whereas a de facto
OL/NL is one that is commonly practiced and is given a special status within governmental institutions, administrations and economic and financial activities.

MOROCCAN BERBER VARIETIES

Let’s now rediscover the Moroccan sociolinguistic situation in the light of such information. In Morocco, the de jure OL is Standard Modern Arabic and another de jure Standard Moroccan Berber is in process.

The de facto OL is French as witnessed by its predominant use in government institutions, business, finance, banking, health system, exam lists in universities, etc.

In Morocco, there is no de jure NL, but there are two de facto NLs, namely, MA varieties and MB varieties that are used for both communication and identity.

As yet, there is no Standard Moroccan Berber, which will, in the long run, be in fact a prescriptive synthesis of the three MB varieties, because Standardization, according to Haugen, ’72, is a long-term process that spans over four stages, namely, selection, codification (graphization, grammaticalization and lexicalization), elaboration and finally implementation leading to acceptance. For the time being, SM Berber is clogged at the second stage.

The Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) has been entrusted with the process of standardizing Moroccan Berber varieties into one Standard Language. So far, the first stage of Selection has been achieved with the synthesis of the three main MB varieties into one labeled Tamazight, not to be confused with Tamazight, that is used in the Middle Atlas and the High Atlas mountains.

Similarly, the second stage of Codification has been reached with the compilation of grammar books and dictionaries as well as the adoption of Neo-Tifinagh script, developed from an earlier form of Tifinagh as the standard writing system for the Standardized Moroccan Berber. Neo-Tifinagh is written from left to right.

Until recently, virtually no books or websites were published in Tifinagh, favoring Latin or Arabic scripts for serious usage. However, it is extremely popular for symbolic use, with many books and websites written in a different script featuring logos or title pages using Neo-Tifinagh. Outside Morocco, Neo-Tifinagh has no official status.

After some generations, there will be a fully standardized MB, which will, then, be another de jure OL of Morocco together with Standard Modern Arabic.

Needless to remind you that neither SM Arabic nor SM Berber are NLs, as they are not acquired, i.e. not mother-tongues, and that they are just de jure OLs that are learned at school for the purpose of communication, not identity, and that they serve the purpose of power, not solidarity.
If we look around, we will notice that there are many speech communities that are linguistically heterogeneous, but that have not recourse to more than one OL. France has 1OL (French) and 5 main RLs (Alsatian 3.5 %, Breton 3.3%, Corsican 1%, Occitan and Provençal 7.5%. Spain also has 1OL (Spanish) and 3ROLs (Catalan 17%, Galician 7% and Basque 2%).

It is true that 1OL is a symbol of power and that more than 1OL is a symbol of division. However, more than 1NL is a symbol of solidarity, of co-existence and multiple-identity.

Throughout the world, according to Hitchings, ’11, there are at least 8 countries with no jure OL, namely, the UK, the US, Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea, Costa Rica, Bosnia and Australia.

Still, English is recognized as OL in more than 60 countries, French (29 countries), Arabic (26 countries), Spanish (19 countries), Portuguese (9 countries) and German (6 countries).

**CONCLUSION**

By way of conclusion, let me reiterate my claim that Morocco is a multilingual speech community in which MA varieties and MB varieties are de facto NLs that are used for both identity and communication and that are symbols of solidarity.

Standard Modern Arabic and Standard Moroccan Berber are de jure OLs that are used only for communication and not for identity and that are symbols of power and not for solidarity.

Standard Modern Arabic is itself losing ground, again, as French is back as the language of teaching science subjects at Secondary schools.

Article 5 of the Constitution implicitly hints at the necessity of learning and mastering foreign languages of greatest use. No wonder that the future is for more English and French. In fact, English and French are the two languages most often used in international institutions, namely, International Criminal Court, International Labor Organization, FIFA, IMF, IOC, International Telecommunication Union, Inter-Parliamentary Union, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Organization for Islamic Cooperation, UN, Universal Postal Union, WB, World Rugby and WTO.

The de jure OLs of Morocco will, then, be limited to parliament and court-room proceedings and visually to administrations and schools front building signs.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


HALLIDAY, MAK (1973) Explorations in the Functions of Language. Edward Arnold


WWW.Haut Commissariat du Plan.ma