# Towards Standardizing Moroccan Arabic - Or Not!

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**Abstract**

As a process, standardization works on establishing the conventional forms of a variety in order to be maintained by a speech community in their normative usages such as education, science and media. In the context of Morocco, there have been incessant attempts by the advocates of the standardization of Moroccan Arabic to codify and expand the range of its functions especially in the media and more recently in education by integrating Moroccan Arabic words in the primary school curriculum. Such attempts, however, have generated more controversy than success and Moroccan Arabic standardization is still a far-fetched goal. Thus, the main aim of the present research is to carry out an exploratory study into the constraints and possibilities for the standardization of Moroccan Arabic. We will show through the examination of its context that such a process is bound to raise difficulties if not controversies given the sensitive nature of the issue of languages which tend to be ideologically highly constraining given their sensitive political and religious associations.

## Introduction

Contact between different speech communities represents one breeding ground for change and accommodation which can affect the forms as well as the functions of language. Multilingual communities is a result of this contact situation which displays the dominance of one language over another, or the resolve of a speech

community to incorporate another language so as to satisfy their needs, be they linguistic or socio-economic. In a complex linguistic situation such as Morocco where several varieties coexist and yet compete with each other, the compartmentalization of the functions of Moroccan Arabic and Standard Arabic is a highly contentious issue. The inclusion of Moroccan Arabic in this year's school curricula has brought the issue to the fore of the political debate across a national divide between liberals calling for its standardization and conservatives warning against it. This article explores the prospects of standardizing Moroccan Arabic taking into consideration both its cross-national and national context.

## 1. Moroccan Arabic in the cross-national context

To understand the factors and challenges to the standardization of Moroccan Arabic, it is only natural that we look at its history in the context of Morocco and the cross-national context of the Arab world. It is generally believed that Arabic language originated, in its early form referred to as Classical Arabic, from the Arabian Peninsula (Tylor 2001). Assuming that Arabic colloquia such as Moroccan Arabic originate from Classical Arabic, the first question that may come to mind is how these colloquia have the same origin and at the same time vary significantly. The difference between them can be limited to single meanings conveyed using different words such as the quantifier 'a lot' linguistically

enacted as 'bzzaf' in Moroccan Arabic, 'awi in Egyptian Arabic, 'yaser' in Algerian Arabic, and 'barsha' in Tunisian Arabic. Difference can mount to mutual unintelligibility. In fact, the more we move geographically from the origin of the language (the Arabian Peninsula), the more distant and the less mutually intelligible the colloquia become. For instance, Moroccan Arabic is closer to Algerian Arabic, Algerian is closer to Tunisian, and Tunisian is closer to Libyan, and Libyan is closer Egyptian, and Egyptian is closer to Saudi Arabic. The mutual intelligibility of these colloquia is determined in terms of the distance or proximity along the geographical continuum. Egyptian is closer to Libyan than it is to Moroccan Arabic.

Variation cannot simply be defined along country borders as we can easily discern different dialects within the same country like *Fassi*, *Shamali*, *Hassani*, *Rbati*, *Wejdi* … in Morocco. The difference between them can also be understood in terms of the geographical continuum explained above rather than national borders. For instance Wejdi is closer to the dialect spoken in the Western regions of Algeria that it is to the Moroccan Arabic dialect spoken in Agadir. Variation may take place even within the same speech community. Indeed, "not all members of a speech community speak the same all of the time, and even individual speakers say the same things differently in different situations and to different people" (Horesh 2017). Having said that, we can still

recognize dialects that identify different speech communities as a result of common social, economic and political factors (Escure 1997). In the context of the Arab countries, this has created different diglossic situations. Furguson (1959: 336), who first coined this term in English, states that:

> DIGLOSSIA is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or in another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

Indeed, we can notice in the Arab countries that in addition to each community's everyday dialect generally non-codified, referred to by Furguson as 'low variety' (L-variety), a second, highly codified variety referred to by Furguson as 'high variety' (H-variety) is exclusively used in formal situations such as the government communications, literature, education and the media, but not used for ordinary conversation. In most cases, the H variety has no native speakers. It should be noted that the H-variety in the Arab countries has continuously been modernized into what is referred to today as Modern Standard Arabic.

The notion of diglossia, as defined by Furguson, does not however account for such linguistic changes in the Arab context as L-varieties are increasingly used in formal contexts such as education and media while Modern Standard Arabic is used more and more in everyday conversations. The extent to which the two varieties have changed or become closer to or distant from each other vary from one country to another depending several social, political and economic factors that influenced their interaction with each other as well as their contact with other languages. Therefore, to understand how Moroccan Arabic has evolved, it is essential to understand its contextual history.

## 2. Moroccan Arabic in its National Context

Throughout its history, Morocco has been a language contact place of several civilizations such as the Romans and the Phoenicians. According to Fournet (2012:87) the contact of Amazigh, indigenous inhabitants of Morocco and by and large of North Africa, with other people of antiquity began with the Phoenicians claiming that the 12[th]Egyptian Dynasty, which reigned from about 945 BC to 715 BC, was of Libyan origin or mešweš, an Amazigh group. However, Arabization of the Middle Ages and French colonization are two historical stages that have radically changed the linguistic profile of Morocco.

Contact between Arabs and Amzighs represented a radical change in the history of Morocco. In a few decades, Arab speakers have spread in the vast plain

areas of Morocco and with them spread their language. The Arabic language was first introduced into Morocco by the Muslim conquest during the 8th century and then the coming of the Banu Hilal and the Sulaymin the 12th century (Bozworth, Donzel, Lewis &Pellat 1985:1223). Classical and Bedouin Arabic coexisted with the indigenous Amazigh varieties resulting in a koineization process by which a new variety of a language -Moroccan Arabic- emerges from the mixing of several varieties (Bishop 1998).

As any language, the Moroccan Arabic Koiné has evolved because of several factors. Contact with French as a result of the French protectorate and Arabization of education stand out as two major influential factors. The French language has been able to transcend all geographical, cultural, social and even political boundaries. Although the 2011 Constitution declared that Arabic and Amazigh are the official languages of Morocco, French still has a leading role as the language of the social elite and the language of commerce and trade, and the exclusive language of instruction for sciences and engineering at the university. Its influence on Moroccan Arabic can be seen in the amount of borrowings of words such as *boita* (boite), *fershita* (fourchette), *tonobile* (automobile) *etc.* and sometimes even full expressions such as *jnafou* (je m'en foue), as well as the frequent code switching instances in daily

conversations reported by sociolinguistics studies on Morocco (Bentahila 1983, Heath 1989, Ennaji 2005).
French has however started to lose its influence since the total arabization of primary and secondary education (Aitsiselmi & Marley2009).Arabization of education was one of the main objectives adopted after independence. Political parties exploited every opportunity to call for Standard Arabic to regain its legitimacy by restoring its place and role in the life of the nation. However, as rightly stated in the 2012 report of The Special Commission for Education and Training, "Arabization, hastily implemented without a rigorous and comprehensive approach, has led to weakened levels in the mastery of both French and [Standard] Arabic". While both Standard Arabic and French are in decline, Moroccan Arabic has increasingly occupied the key role of national identity and values, which lead several politicians and media outlets to call for the standardization of Moroccan Arabic.

## 3. Motivation for the Standardization of Moroccan Arabic

Standardization represents the processes that convert a variety with an oral tradition, usually referred to as a 'dialect', to the level of a written variety, usually referred to as 'language' that is used by state institutions, education, media and business communication. This process is both ideologically motivated and prescriptively oriented. It is ideologically motivated in the sense the standard form is often the variety spoken by the most

dominant group. Linguistic dominance is associated with the number of speakers (generally consisting of the majority) and/or economic and political status. For instance, the dialect of London and vicinity (Oxford and Cambridge) in the fifteenth century, because of the economic affluence of the area, became the standard form of English (Wardhaugh, 2010:40). The process of standardization is also prescriptively oriented in the sense that it prescribes fixed conventions in terms of spelling, pronunciation, word meaning and structures to be regarded as 'correct', while eliminating variability as 'incorrect'. For instance, the double negative 'That won't do you no good' used in some dialects of English would be characterised as 'incorrect' by most prescriptivist grammarians.

In the Moroccan context, there are social, economic and educational motivations for the standardization of Moroccan Arabic. The decline of Pan-Arabism motivated a tendency especially among the Moroccan youth to consider themselves first, if not only, as Moroccans rather than Arabs. Since "Language is an important vehicle for achieving and enacting social identity and for locating oneself within a society" (Sachdev, 2014:48), it is expected that Moroccans would identify with Moroccan Arabic. However, the particularities of the linguistic context in Morocco may not necessarily implicate the same expectations. Many Moroccans of Amazigh descent would associate their identity with

Amazigh language rather than Moroccan Arabic. There is also the key factor of religion as most Moroccans would associate their religious identity with Standard/Classical Arabic being the language of the Holy Qur'an. The interwoven and complex nature of the Moroccan context in terms of interpedently varied languages interrelated multiple ethnicities and a unified religion make generalizations concerning speech, social or ethnic group association with Moroccan Arabic very difficult.

The recent calls by many Moroccans to standardize Moroccan Arabic go beyond the purely social motivations. Dr Alami (01/07/2013), in a news article written in Moroccan Arabic on *yabiladi* online platform, claims that only through standardization of Moroccan Arabic that we can ensure democracy, equal opportunity and real prosperity. Standardization is not only concerned with literary and linguistic goals, says Ratmelia (2017) in her study of the Basque language, it is also motivated by the economic good of society as modern day economy requires "a great deal of cooperation between individuals of different skills, and effective collaboration could only occur when both parties speak and write the same standard language".

There have been recently many calls in the media to stress the importance of learning Moroccan Arabic before a child starts learning other languages. Proponents of this argument claim that learning the home language would help children build the academic foundation that would

contribute to their future academic and professional success. It will facilitate the learning of other skills such as Math and sciences with having to double the effort by learning a foreign language before being able to study other skills. Several studies have indeed shown that placing young children in early childhood programs without native language support is socially and culturally detrimental and has negative effects on their long-term academic outcomes (New& Cochra, 2007:79). It may be that this is not the case in the context of Morocco as other studies have proved that typological relations between languages affect the learning of a foreign language (Davies & Taronna, 2012:8). Learning Standard Arabic which is very close to Moroccan Arabic is unlikely to represent any difficulty to the Moroccan child.

It goes without saying that the function of language is essentially to vehicle meanings of our culture, and culture is in turn considered to be carrying values of the people that constitute their collective and individual identity. When we exclude the mother language from our educational system which represents the basis of our both our social development and continuity, we unfortunately discard if not destroy an important aspect of our heritage. However, even when assuming that standardization of Moroccan Arabic will positively impact the national development, the question remains whether, given the present circumstances, linguistic standardization is achievable.

## 4. Moroccan Arabic: Can standardization be achieved?

The process of standardization is carried out on two levels. The first is related to the enactment of laws and policies that define the status and functions of a linguistic variety in state institutions and in public life. The second is related to the work of trained specialists to transform the political desire of the community to establish a consistent communication system between individuals into a linguistic reality. This work is carried out within an institution of the state, with a budget of public money, indicating that the state officially sponsors this language and adopts what it becomes, and thus assigns to it new functions not limited to the traditional functions of spoken dialect among the general public in daily life. In so doing, standard language must undergo a long series of preparation stages, and still be subject to ongoing reviews and checks by specialists and stake holders.The first stage the process of standardisation begins with is selecting one of the many forms of language that exist in a society to be the standard. Moroccan Arabic dialects vary in phonology, vocabulary and grammar but not the level of unintelligibility. Choosing the standard form from the different dialects is not a random act. It is generally the case that the chosen form is one that is accepted by the dominant group who has the power to standardize and diffuse this language. In the context of Morocco, the variety of Moroccan Arabic spoken in Fez is the most likely candidate to assume this role given that

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is "perceived to be the most instrumental and prestigious among all other varieties" (Errihani, 2016: 741).Once a form is chosen, its authority is reinforced by codifying it through media publications, the creation and use of dictionaries, curricula and grammar textbooks. Such codification processes have started recently in the media[1] and even decades ago in the field of literature[2] and education[3]. Further research is needed to find out which Moroccan Arabic variety is mostly dominant in the codification process. Having said that, we can easily notice an elaboration of Moroccan Arabic vocabulary mainly through borrowings from Standard Arabic which ensues in response the significantly expansive function of Moroccan Arabic. A writing system, although unofficially, is in process with the publication of several Moroccan Arabic grammar and textbooks, the completion of several national and international researches on its different linguistic aspects and attempts to collect Moroccan Arabic vocabulary. In this momentum, Moroccan Arabic will eventually creates the political will to prescribe it as an official language.

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[1].There are now radio channels and News online platforms presenting the news in Moroccan Arabic.
[2]. Plays at the national level tend to use more Moroccan Arabic.
[3]. Teaching from primary to university level is conducted at least partially by many teachers in Moroccan Arabic.

## Conclusion

The multilingual nature of Morocco is a fact that cannot be denied. It is also a sociolinguistic reality that cannot be understood except within its contexts. Standardization is not the creation of a superficial language, a language for the sake of an immediate need. It is rather intended as a long-term series of ongoing transformations that is possible only in the light of the desire of a community for linguistic uniformity. Therefore, the determination of the added value of the standardization of Moroccan Arabic and its effect on strengthening or weakening the official languages is only possible in the presence of scientific data derived from field research. Further study of Moroccan attitudes and perceptions towards Moroccan Arabic is of paramount importance to success or failure of the calls to its standardization. The debate between the two camps (liberals and conservatives), no matter how heated it can be at times, will only serve as a basic resource that will inevitably contribute to enriching the Moroccan cultural scene

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