

Le français, العربية, ⵜⴰⴳⴷⵓⴷⴰⵢⵜ, el español, and now English: Language War or Thriving Multilingualism in Morocco?

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Introduction

In this *carte blanche*, the authors share insights on the complex issue of languages in Morocco, with a special focus on the growing uses of English vis-à-vis the long-established dominance of French. The discussion provides a sociolinguistic profile of the country, outlining its history of multilingualism as well as the social and cultural implications of using numerous adopted languages. It examines in particular the domain-based use of French and English by highlighting the importance of these two languages for the socioeconomic status of their users. The authors conclude by proposing an alternative to the traditional view of languages in Morocco as being in fierce competition with one another.

Sociolinguistic profile of Morocco

The social and economic developments in the North African country of Morocco have led to its speech community acquiring multiple foreign languages over the centuries. Originally monolingual in the indigenous language of Tamazight, Moroccans first embraced Arabic as an additional language of use following the Arab conquest in the 7th century. After ca. 1400 years of Tamazight and Arabic bilingualism, the Moroccan speech community next added French and Spanish to its linguistic repertoire when colonizers settled in the country in the early 20th century. Most recently, a fifth language, English, has been spreading markedly across various domains within this speech community, enriching even further the intricate linguistic tapestry that already exists.

During the 44 years of the French Protectorate over Morocco (1912 – 1956), the country's sole official language was French. Also following independence, French continued to be used in most sectors, including education, until the mid-1970s. At that time, the Moroccan government introduced an Arabization policy aiming to restore Arabic use in public schools (Moustaoui, 2017: 535). The new language policy took until 1990 to be fully implemented throughout the 12-year curriculum of primary and secondary public education (Moustaoui, 2017: 535). On the tertiary level, however, French remained the medium of instruction (MOI), especially for technical and scientific subjects.

This inconsistency in language use across the different educational levels ultimately proved to be detrimental. This became apparent when the first cohorts of students completed their secondary education under the Arabization policy. In transitioning to higher education, students enrolling in French-medium university degree programs found themselves at a linguistic disadvantage. In a 2004 study, Marley interviewed middle and high school teachers about the linguistic skills of their students. The teachers confirmed that, as would be expected, student proficiency in French had declined as a result of using Arabic as the MOI in primary and secondary education. The instructors furthermore felt that their graduating students were linguistically 'unprepared for higher studies' (Marley, 2004: 40). Compounding this problem is the fact that even after completing their tertiary education, these students had to contend further with higher unemployment rates than their French-educated peers, since high proficiency in French also was requisite for professional careers. To summarize, the country's Arabization policy in primary and secondary education was at odds with students' linguistic needs in the still francized domains of tertiary education and white-collar, professional employment.

One consequence of this inconsistency in language use across interconnected domains was that families with the financial means began adopting the elite's long-established practice of enrolling their children in French-medium primary and secondary schooling. In Morocco, such schools are administered or accredited by different institutions in France, or are privately-owned domestic institutions known for excellence in teaching in French. This practice has extended to higher education as well, where

attending private Moroccan tertiary institutions or universities abroad, mostly in France, has become increasingly popular. Upon completing their university studies, French-educated young Moroccans typically land higher-paid jobs in the public and private sectors. In contrast, as already noted, their Arabized compatriots contend with greater unemployment, having spent years in an education system that often leaves them excluded from positions of ‘power and decision-making’ (González, 2015: 266).

Rising unemployment among degree-holders across the country made it apparent that the Moroccan public educational system and its language policy were not adequately preparing students for the job market. This reality prompted three educational reform initiatives over the course of twenty years. The most recent, the *Vision Stratégique de la Réforme 2015-2030*, has among its goals notably the training of students to become proficient in multiple languages. The policy aims to introduce Arabic, Tamazight, and French in grade one of elementary school, with English eventually added to the curriculum in grade four. Another foreign language, preferably Spanish, is to be introduced in grade 10 of high school. Aside from being taught as subjects, French and English are to be used as MOIs for technical and scientific courses beginning in middle school. To ensure this new policy was implemented throughout the country, Morocco’s Parliament passed in August 2019 the framework law 51.17 institutionalizing French and English as MOIs. Parliament’s action on this issue was swift, with the law passing only months after its proposal and then implemented just one month later, in September of the 2019-2020 academic year!

In spite of arguably the best of intentions, having an Arabized public school system and a francized private education counterpart ultimately resulted in widening the social gap already existing within Moroccan society. Moroccans lacking sufficient proficiency in French were disadvantaged, with slimmer chances of joining the country’s corporate workforce and therefore improving their socioeconomic status. Given this critical situation, the question arises whether the growing role of another internationally powerful language in the business domain, English, can provide some form of remedy.

Can English afford Moroccans additional professional opportunities?

In a country where French remains dominant in numerous economically vital domains, English does not represent a simple panacea for reducing social inequality. Government agencies and administrations, private companies, and numerous French corporations with significant investment in the country all operate mainly in the French language. In a recent study conducted in small and medium-sized enterprises across the Kingdom, Majdi (2016) found a high degree of French use in corporate verbal and written communication. Significantly, Majdi also noted that executives valued in particular French proficiency when recruiting new employees. The role of French in Morocco and the level of language competence expected in the job market at present cannot be ignored. It would be very ambitious, if not unrealistic, to argue that English alone, as an alternative to French, could narrow the gap between social classes in the country.

However, there is evidence that a growing number of Moroccans who find acquiring French difficult are resorting to developing their skills in English instead. Studies by Buckner (2011: 244) and Kachoub (2010: 96) demonstrate that many Moroccans without adequate fluency in French view proficiency in English as a viable option for gaining better professional opportunities. English is seen as affording alternatives for employment, either in Morocco's limited English-only job market or abroad in one of the many countries using English as an L1 or Additional Language. Thus English proficiency affords Moroccans career prospects beyond those available for French speakers at home and abroad. For a growing number of Moroccan families, English has become a means for improving their socioeconomic status, even as French remains the country's dominant language for professional careers.

In spite of the predominance of French in Morocco's job market, an increasing number of areas require proficiency in English. For example, in recent years many companies in French and English-speaking countries have outsourced their customer care services to Morocco. In 2017, a total of 638 call centers were registered in different regions (Agence Nationale de Réglementation des Télécommunications, 2017: 28), creating almost 70,000 jobs as of April 2019 (AbiNader, 2019). While the majority of these positions require fluency in French, a significant percentage is for proficient

speakers of English. The American computer technology company DELL, for instance, regularly announces on its website vacant positions in Morocco requiring advanced proficiency in English alone ([DELL, n.d.](#)). These openings have been for customer care agents, technical support technicians, financial analysts, software specialists, and sales interns, among others. Such opportunities represent options for Moroccans proficient in English who otherwise may be at a disadvantage in the competitive and French-oriented job market.

Is English competing with French?

The recent spread of English in Morocco's job market raises the issue of whether the language is becoming a competitor with French within the country. Over the years, sociolinguists examining multilingualism in Morocco have commented on the status of English vis-à-vis French. In the 1990s, the consensus among scholars was that the spread of English did not represent a serious threat to the long-established position of French. At that time, Sadiqi (1991: 113) and Elbiad (1991: 34) argued that English would not be employed for oral communication to the same degree as French was. By 2005, Ennaji (114) recognized the increasing uses of English and speculated that they might lead to fierce competition with French, especially in the domains of education, science, and technology. More recently, in 2011 Buckner (235) also recognized that English is becoming more and more important; however, she still argued that it is unlikely to replace French.

It has been almost a decade since the latest of these studies was conducted, and in the interim English use in Morocco has evolved further, arguably at an even faster pace. This is especially obvious in domains in which younger generations of Moroccans interact. Education is one of the most conspicuous domains in which English has been gaining institutional recognition in recent years. Momentum for recognizing English began building during the term of Lahcen Daoudi, the former Moroccan Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research (2012 - 2017). While in office, Daoudi was known in particular for promoting English, and he took numerous prominent actions to ensure Morocco's educational system became more receptive to the language. In public talks, Daoudi often explicitly encouraged Moroccan students of all levels to develop their

English proficiency (Alyaoum24, 2014). On September 15, 2014, he took the initiative to issue a formal decree requiring that all applicants for positions as university professors demonstrate English proficiency during the hiring process. On May 20, 2016, he went a step further and issued a ministerial note mandating that graduate students in some fields show proficiency in English upon completing their doctoral degree. In Daoudi's view, Moroccan higher education could not prosper by relying on French alone, since English is needed for accessing the most recent and influential research findings. Daoudi once remarked that researchers who are unable to read the most recent scholarly publications in English 'doivent attendre la traduction française qui peut prendre jusqu'à 10 ans' (Benezha, 2014). The implication is that Moroccan scholars doing research solely in the medium of French would cause the country to fall behind in scientific progress and perhaps also in the international rankings of universities. Providing support for Daoudi's stance is a report by Johnson, Watkinson, and Mabe (2018: 5), which notes that in 2018 over 33,000 academic peer-reviewed journals were published in English, as compared to only 9,400 in other languages. It is obvious from these numbers that the vast majority of scholarly research in fact is communicated in English.

As a consequence, in the Moroccan education sector, if not other domains, English is viewed as becoming nearly as indispensable as French. This present reality, however, should not be interpreted in terms of a simple binary, with French and English viewed as competing in a zero-sum game. One must recognize that currently *both* languages afford Moroccans valuable, if not critical, educational and professional opportunities. The significant role both languages now play in Moroccan society is reflected in findings in a recent study by Kachoub and Hilgendorf (2019), which examines outdoor advertising in Morocco's economic capital of Casablanca. In analyzing various billboards, posters, and wallscapes, Kachoub and Hilgendorf (2019) show how English often is used with French, and to a lesser extent Arabic, in multilingual advertising discourse. Such practices speak to the fact that Moroccans remain comfortable with their multilingual repertoire, of which English is now a part. In the context of Morocco, English has been gaining uses as an Additional Language,

used alongside French and the other codes already part of the country's long-established multilingual repertoire.

Final remarks

The multiplicity of languages used in the Kingdom of Morocco has always been vigorously debated, and this is especially the case in recent years. It is intriguing that Moroccans now are welcoming yet another language to their linguistic repertoire, while still maintaining the languages they previously had acquired. Given this fact, it is problematic to speak of *une guerre des langues* in Morocco, as the majority of media platforms portray the country's current linguistic situation. Buckner (2011: 231-233) in fact has shown that Moroccans assign a particular function to each of the languages they use within their speech community. For example, Tamazight and Arabic are viewed as languages that respectively reflect the social and religious identity of Moroccans, whereas French and English are seen as boosting both their social and economic status. The participants with whom Moroccans interact, the topics they discuss, and the settings in which they converse all determine which code they use. Moroccans should not just accept this linguistic diversity with resignation, but celebrate it given the inherent value and opportunities societal multilingualism offers. The narrative that languages are in rivalry within the speech community is not consistent with the reality that Moroccans historically have used their multiple languages to fulfill distinct communicative needs. If languages were indeed in rivalry, with the goal of having a single linguistic victor, then at least one of the five codes currently part of the Moroccan linguistic repertoire certainly would have disappeared. To date, this has not happened. The words of the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun summarize the country's linguistic situation quite eloquently:

Il n'y a pas de guerre de langues au Maroc. Il ne faut pas exagérer. Il suffit juste de remettre chaque langue à sa place. Au lieu de polémiquer, il vaut mieux encourager nos enfants à apprendre le maximum de langues étrangères. Les langues c'est l'ouverture sur le monde, sur les autres, sur les différences, c'est un enrichissement permanent. Pas de guerre, juste un peu de bruits (Nait Youssef, 2018).

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