

**Multilingualism and the
Construction of Identity in Postcolonial Morocco**

Introduction

Context: Colonial legacy and Morocco's linguistic diversity

Morocco is a country with a complex linguistic background due to the waves of colonization and settlement from various groups who influenced the linguistic practices in the region. While the area has undergone Arab and French settlement, the primary focus of this paper will be on the effects of French colonization on Moroccan linguistic practice during the French protectorate. Specifically, this paper examines how French colonial hegemony has shaped linguistic hierarchies in Morocco and how language continues to sustain postcolonial power structures through education, language use, and identity formation.

I will attempt to explore this question through the study of Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism, the historical power dynamics in Morocco and the resulting linguistic effects, as well as an interview with a multilingual language educator who grew up in Morocco.

Literature Review

Linguistic Imperialism and Colonial Power

The theory of linguistic imperialism was originally developed by the sociolinguist, Robert Phillipson, to describe the domination of the English language "maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages" (Phillipson, 1992, p. 47). Phillipson describes English linguistic imperialism to be an example of *linguicism*, or what he defines as "ideologies, structures, and practices which are used to legitimate, effectuate, and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and immaterial) between groups which are defined on the basis of

language” (p.47). Manifestations of linguistic imperialism, or the systematic domination of one language over another (usually a native language), could take shape in how those who speak the dominant language receive more privileges and opportunities. Another example would be through policy that mandates education in the dominant language, causing the dominant language to develop into a prestige language with the purpose of overriding the influence of the native language.

Phillipson’s theory of the influence of a dominant language also complements Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital, which refers to the social assets that an individual uses to succeed in society (Bourdieu, 1986). There are three forms of cultural capital, including the *embodied* state, or what Bourdieu describes as “long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body”; the *objectified* state, or “cultural goods”; and the institutionalized state which is seen in educational systems (Bourdieu, 1986). Embedded in Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital is linguistic capital, which describes how “language forms a kind of wealth” that manifests itself in the lives and surrounding social systems of individuals for distinction uses (Abrar-ul-Hassan, 2021; Bourdieu, 2000). Furthermore, Bourdieu describes how the symbolic power of language is carried out across different sectors of society— in universities, social groups, and class hierarchies. Prestige languages, such as French, are often used as a symbol of linguistic capital and power. Moreover in the French colonial setting, every trajectory of successful integration is predisposed by the learning of French by some of the elite classes of Morocco (Phillipson, 1992).

Multilingualism and Language Hierarchies in Morocco

There are several languages currently spoken in Morocco as a result of a long history of settlement and colonization. While the two official languages of Morocco are Arabic and Berber,

a regional language also referred to as Amazigh, Moroccans use a variety of languages based on the context of their use. Moroccan Arabic (Darija), Berber, Standard Arabic, French, and Spanish are used, with Moroccan Arabic standing out as the language that is perceived to be the most practical for everyday life (Aabi, 2020).

Berber (Amazigh)

Berber is one of the oldest native languages in current use in Morocco as it was native to the Berber population living in North Africa before the spread of Islam in the 7th century (Aabi, 2020). While the Berbers were not immune to the islamization propagated by the Islamic Empire by the 8th century, they kept their indigenous language (Wardhaugh, 1987). The three varieties of Berber that are spoken in Morocco include: “Tarifit, spoken in the North; Tamazight spoken in the Midlands; and Tachelhit, spoken toward the South in the Souss-Massa region” (Aabi, 2020, p.43). According to the census done by the Régionale Générale du Population & Habitat (RGPH) of Morocco in 2024, Amazigh is the native language of 40.20% of the total population and 75.30% of the population living in rural areas. This discrepancy is telling of the social division between the non French-speaking rural population and the French-speaking population of urban elites.

Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic

As mentioned above, one of the official languages of Morocco is Standard Arabic. This standard dialect is used in media, education, and administrative settings as it is considered to be more formal than the Moroccan dialect of Arabic that is used in everyday informal contexts as the two languages exist in a system of diglossia (Aabi, 2020, p.38).

Moroccan Arabic is a dialect of Arabic that contains influences from Berber as well as borrowed vocabulary from Spanish and French. As of the 2024 census, Arabic is the native language of 59.70% of the total population and of 74.30% of the population living in urban areas (RGPH 2024). While Moroccan Arabic is considered a dialect of the language, its features are distinct to the point that speakers of another dialect have trouble with mutual intelligibility.

French

French spread initially to Morocco during the second wave of French colonization during the 19th century and became an official language when Morocco became a protectorate of France in the 20th century (University of Central Arkansas, n.d.). As a result, Standard French became the language of government, business, and education within the protectorate. According to this linguistic mandate, those who wanted a high level of education in Morocco were forced to pursue it in French, which resulted in the sense of added prestige to those who spoke French (Wardhaugh, 1987). Considering the reputation of French as a language of culture, local *élites* “prized their knowledge of French” as it created a distinction between the *élites* who spoke the language and those who were less fortunate and did not (Wardhaugh, 1987, p.144). This type of linguistic hierarchy was deliberately spread by the French as they sought to use the language as a marker of prestige in the upper classes (Wardhaugh, 1987).

Following the independence of Morocco from France in 1956, the concept of Arabization started to take root in the country as they sought to break away from French influence. While they attempted to convert the Moroccan educational system back to Arabic, the lack of curriculum materials in the language caused the process to slow down. Since then, specific

policies have been adopted to promote the use of Arabic as the language of instruction in schools (Kolli, 2024; Meighan, 2022).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative single-case design to conduct an in-depth exploration of how colonial linguistic hierarchies in Morocco manifest in lived multilingual identity. The research question—How has French colonial hegemony shaped linguistic hierarchies in Morocco, and how does language sustain postcolonial power structures through use, education, and identity?—guided this inquiry. This study was initially inspired by an encounter with a French language educator whose linguistic and cultural identity sparked an interest in exploring the linguistic effects of colonization. The participant was purposively selected for their rich multilingualism (e.g., fluency in Darija, Standard Arabic, French, Spanish, and English; education across Moroccan and U.S. institutions) as an information-rich case capable of elaborating with his personal experiences and perspective from growing up in post-protectorate Morocco. The goal of this research was to capture a personal and authentic angle on the topic through a case study that enriches the understanding of the literature.

Data Collection & Analytical Approach

The data was collected in two rounds, the first one being through an online interview, and the second being a short-answer questionnaire. The interview was recorded and transcribed using Krisp, an audio processing software. The questions covered the participant's demographic information, linguistic background, context of language use, a reflection on multilingualism, and

a recollection of the linguistic practices Morocco while growing up. For the purposes of this study, the participant's name will be kept anonymous.

The data was analyzed through the identification of common themes and patterns found in both the transcribed interview and questionnaire data. Specifically, the both data sources were analyzed by section, and were then evaluated holistically.

Interview Data

Demographic Information

The participant is a 45-year-old individual born and raised in Casablanca, Morocco's biggest city, with family origins from Meknes, Fez, and southern Spain. He has been residing in California since he moved out of Morocco to pursue his education at the age of 18. The participant primarily identifies as Arab and Northern African, although he describes his cultural identity as complex. His educational background in Morocco involved dual immersion with Arabic and French, where social studies and math were taught in Arabic, while French was integrated throughout. His generation was a part of the transitional era of Morocco's education system from a completely French curriculum to a Franco-Arabic dual immersion system. He described how learning in the post-protectorate Arabized education system involved a hybrid approach where higher education remained in French, while primary and secondary school education gradually converted to Arabic instruction. His career path led to becoming a French language teacher because of his passion for languages and education.

Linguistic Background & Language Use

Growing up, the participant used Moroccan Arabic (Darija) as his daily communication language at home. He noted how he used borrowed words from French and Spanish in the local dialect. While he learned Darija, Classical Arabic, and French at a young age, he learned English during high school and Spanish after he moved to America. Currently, he uses Moroccan Arabic—with a “sprinkle” of English—with his brother who lives in California. He uses Spanish to speak with his wife and her side of the family. He describes how he draws from “a revolving wheel” of the languages when he speaks.

When asked about coding switching, he elaborated that due to his profession as a language educator, he code-switches between French and English frequently in the classroom. He also described how his own children, aged 3 and 5, constantly code-switch between English, French, and Spanish. When picking language to express himself, he considers the context and subject of the interaction. For example, he thinks out loud in Darija when thinking about something he needs to tell his sister. Or, he would verbalize what he is thinking in English if he needs to communicate with the administration at the school where he works.

Reflection on Linguistic Practices in Morocco, Multilingualism and Identity

When asked about how language shapes his identity, the participant commented that regardless of the history, French is a part of his identity, and now a part of his children’s identity as well. When analyzing his own dialect, he realized, “We use French without knowing.” During the interview, the participant mentioned that he grew up using and hearing expressions with French origins without realizing it until recently. For example, the word *kilimini*, which is used to describe a wealthy kid without street smarts, comes from the French phrase *Qu’il est mignon*, which means *How cute he is!*. He had a similar realization for the words *beau gosse*, which means *handsome guy* in French, and *salgot*, which comes from the French phrase *sale gosse*

which means *dirty kid*. To elaborate, he noted that even if people who are illiterate in Morocco, they use French expressions without knowing it.

One anecdote that he shared about the use of French in Morocco is that “if a guy wanted to impress a girl, he would never write in Arabic,” because of the implied higher status when speaking in French. He phrased it as how “the language identifies you before you identify” yourself” in a way where the language speaks for itself in the case of prestige and class. He recalled how French was, and still is, very much a prestige language. For example, he mentioned that in order to be taken seriously when applying for a job, resumes must be written in French and interviews must be passed in French. He reflected that this is a strange dichotomy of people who do not want to speak the language of the colonizer, but that doing so results in limited economic opportunities. When asked about whether people associate French with colonialism, he noted that for some,

“French may evoke ideas of cultural domination, social inequality, or elite privilege, since French has long been associated with administration, higher education, and social status. Some therefore see its continued dominance as a reminder that colonial influence has not fully disappeared.”

He also mentioned how “language practices in Morocco today still reflect colonial-era divisions, especially along class and educational lines, even though those divisions are more subtle and contested than before.”

Finally, I asked him about the role of Arabic in shaping identity, especially with the Arabization efforts after the protectorate period. He replied that because of how colonialism weakened the institutional role of Arabic by replacing it with French in administrative and higher education settings, Arabic has become a language of “strong symbolic legitimacy.” He

specifically mentioned that it represents “it represents national identity, religion, and resistance to colonial domination.”

Overall, conducting the interviews with the participant breathed a layer of life into the theories and data that were gathered through the literature. It was interesting to see how the literature manifested in the individual’s life while growing up in Casablanca.

Analysis and Discussion

A pattern that stood out to me from the interview data was that the participant showed how French, even after the colonial period, became embedded into the cultural fabric of Morocco. From the regularly used expressions in French to the distinct usage of French to show prestige, the language clearly plays a powerful role in their culture. How does the participant's experience fit into Phillipson’s theory of linguistic imperialism? The main points of Phillipson’s theory include the systematic domination of one language over another, an increased amount of privileges and opportunities for speakers of the dominant language, policy-driven mandates promoting the dominant language, and the undermining of the native language.

The first point in the theory is reflected in the increased number of professional opportunities that become accessible with the knowledge of French. The participant specifically mentioned how resumes and interviews for a typical office job are required to be in French. Without sufficient knowledge in the language, Moroccans are unable to find work in government positions or at banks. What stood out to me from the interview was how the participant acknowledged that there are those who resent the French language for its colonial attachments, but also that they cannot deny how using the language makes economic success more accessible. This detail suggests that rather than being resolved or accepted, the shadow of colonialism has

been internalized and absorbed into the system, where an employee must prove himself in the prestige language in order to be accepted to work.

The second point found in Phillipson's theory about the policy promoting the dominant language in education was also covered by the participant. Having lived through the generation trying to reclaim education in Arabic, the native tongue, the participant saw firsthand how reliant the educational infrastructure was on the French language and teaching methods, to the point where—to this day, technical subjects are still being taught in French. This can be described as a systematic perpetuation of the colonial mandate of French education, which aligns with Bourdieu's theory of institutionalized cultural capital because of the elevated status of French education. Even for new generations being born decades after the protectorate, they are still learning French in order to prepare for university and professional life. From what the participant explained about the use of French outside of the professional field, the professional prestige of French trickled down into daily conversation with the purpose to impress. The participant also explained how individuals in Morocco often use French as a display of class and privilege, which aligns with Bourdieu's theory of linguistic capital. The biggest example of the internalization of the prestige status of French is how individuals who want to ask a girl out on a date do so in French, because they use French as a societal symbol of power and class.

French has become so integrated into the culture and expressions of the region that some Darija speakers, such as the participant, do not realize or distinguish the French origin of certain expressions. While there are those who recognize the colonial weight that the language carries, the influence of the language is undeniable across various societal fields.

While the participant's experience aligned with Phillipson's theory, one thing that differs is the fact that Standard Arabic and Amazigh are the current official languages of Morocco,

which signifies that even with the embedded cultural influence of French, Arabic and Amazigh are still being supported in language policy. It is significant that schools are teaching in Arabic, even if not fully, it is still a symbol of independence and an individual identity. Even for Amazigh to be an official language of Morocco is a step towards not repeating the same colonial heavy domination of one language and the delegitimation of another.

While the depth of the participant's observations is particularly telling of the situation, it remains a case study from a single perspective of an urban, educated, individual who grew up in Casablanca and moved to the United States. As a single-case study, it is important to acknowledge these findings do not claim to represent all Moroccan linguistic experiences, particularly those shaped by rural, Amazigh-dominant, or lower socioeconomic contexts. An individual from a more rural area or one who speaks Amazigh could have different observations about the language hierarchy. For a future iteration of this study, it would be helpful to conduct interviews with multiple individuals from several different backgrounds.

Conclusion

This case study examined how French colonial hegemony has shaped linguistic hierarchies in Morocco and how language continues to sustain postcolonial power structures through education, language use, and identity formation. Drawing on Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism and Bourdieu's concepts of cultural and linguistic capital, the findings illustrate that French continues to function as a prestige language in Morocco despite no longer holding official status. Through its institutionalized role in education, employment, and professional legitimacy, French operates as a form of linguistic capital that grants access to social mobility while simultaneously reproducing colonial-era inequalities.

The participant's experiences demonstrate that linguistic imperialism in postcolonial contexts does not rely solely on formal policy but persists through deeply embedded social practices. French proficiency remains a prerequisite for higher education and professional success, reinforcing class distinctions and privileging those with access to learning French. At the same time, Arabic occupies a role of symbolic legitimacy, representing national identity, independence, and resistance to colonial domination. By the same token, Amazigh represents a symbol of rural life and more local identity. These linguistic dynamics demonstrate that multilingualism in Morocco does not dissolve linguistic hierarchy or colonial legacies; rather, it compels individuals to navigate their identities within a system where languages hold unequal social value. With that said, the participant brought up the important point that language may influence someone's perception of an individual, but it does not dictate the identity of the individual. One is free to express himself in any language and should not be held back by prescriptive rules or disruptive policy—even while considering the implications of neglecting a certain language. Outside of this study, the participant once told me that language and identity are additive rather than subtractive, so one is free to choose when and how to use their languages.

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