Language Issues in Morocco

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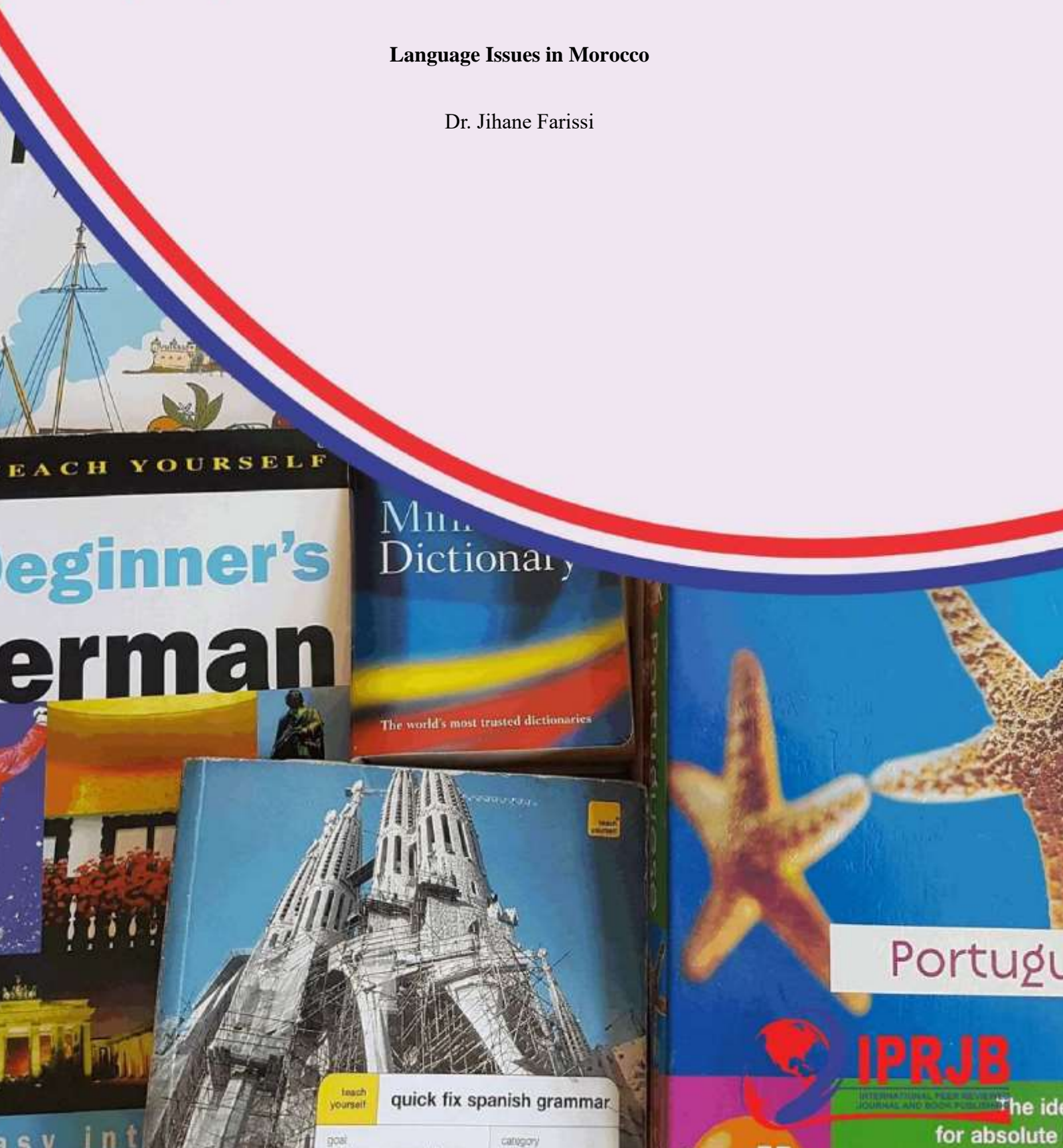
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Abstract

It is well-known that Morocco is a multilingual country. The fact that a number of languages, along with their varieties, are used by the population is therefore the rule rather than the exception. So many countries exhibit the same situation and it is not an exaggeration to say that no country is monolingual in the sociolinguistic sense of this term. Indeed, even in the so- called monolingual settings in which speakers make use of only one language, these latter are observed to use different varieties of this language in accordance with various factors present in the linguistic situation like setting, topic, interlocutors, mood, etc. Language issues in many parts of the world affect a wide range of areas such as education, the public life, the media, arts, literature, politics, religion and government institutions, to name only these. In Morocco, the field of education faces a number of challenges relating to the functions of the languages in use in the country. This paper tries to investigate some of the language issues in education in Morocco through eliciting the views of a group of teachers and officials. On the basis of these views, the paper shows that the policy of arabisation has not had the expected results in education, administration and the public life in view of the fact that French and Moroccan Arabic are making substantial progress as languages of communication. The teaching of French suffers from high levels of poor proficiency on the part of the learners. The teaching of Amazighe is impeded by unsupportive official policies which do not yet recognise the rightness of teaching this language to the whole school population in the country. It is suggested that the issue of language in education in Morocco will greatly benefit from a more reasonable language policy which would guarantee equal chances of access to education for the national languages and better management of the teaching of foreign languages.

Keywords: *Language Issues, Education, Arabisation, Morocco*

INTRODUCTION

As is specified in the Moroccan constitution (Morocco, 2011), the official languages of Morocco are Arabic and Amazighe. Although these names have not raised any problem for both the decision makers and the layman, it should be said that they do not refer to discrete languages. In fact, there are different varieties of Arabic used in the country, i.e., the standard variety, often called Modern Standard Arabic, which is, together with Amazighe, the de jure institutionalised language of the country and its three varieties, the vernacular variety, termed Moroccan Arabic, which is used as the mother tongue of a great body of the population and a number of regional varieties of this latter. Amazighe is found in the form of three varieties, i.e., Tarifit, Tamazight and Tashelhit. There exist a number of sub-varieties of each one of these varieties. Amazighe and Moroccan Arabic are mother tongues and, as such, they are used as home languages, in the street and for intimacy purposes. The foreign languages used with various degrees of attainment in Morocco are French, English and Spanish. They are used in education, administration, the media and the public life. German, Italian and Russian are used in very limited areas as they are taught in some universities and in some language centres.

In addition to these languages, it is interesting to mention the mixed varieties that are used by a large part of the population. Often called switching or mixing, these varieties have come to establish for themselves a kind of linguistic legitimacy in that they can be considered as "full-fledged varieties" in the speech repertoire of some Moroccans, namely the educated and the youth. These varieties are indeed informal practices which are described here, by analogy, as varieties.

The pervasive nature of code switching has a number of consequences in education, the administration and the public life. First, it is used by a great number of speakers as a means of everyday communication which highly facilitates linguistic exchange through creativity, clarification and explanation, among others. As a natural linguistic phenomenon, code switching has become an inherent part of the linguistic identity of a great number of Moroccans. In education, teachers make extensive use of switching, especially between the learners' mother tongue and the school language, which greatly contributes to better levels of achievement. In the administration and the public life, where it is used in both verbal exchanges and written documents, switching plays the role of facilitating smooth interaction.

In sum, the linguistic landscape of Morocco includes two mother tongues (Amazighe and Moroccan Arabic), one non-native language (Modern Standard Arabic), foreign languages (French, Spanish and English) and switching between these languages. Institutionally, Amazighe and modern Standard Arabic are official languages while Moroccan Arabic is a national language. This study tries to set the record straight concerning the official discourse which keeps praising the outcomes of the arabisation policy. It tries to draw attention to the difficulties which are faced by this policy in managing the teaching of French and that of Amazighe.

Review of Literature

The complex linguistic situation that obtains in Morocco has given rise to a fierce competition between the different languages in use, each one of them trying to have its grip on the vital areas of economic, social and political production. For the last few decades, Moroccan Arabic has been gaining ground over Standard Arabic in the media and education in particular. The competition between these two languages seems to favour the side of Moroccan Arabic as the language which is widely used by the youth in social media, inside the classroom in education,

in a number of government institutions, such as the parliament, the ministries' offices, the territorial administration, etc. In all these areas, the use of Moroccan Arabic is supported by its position as a native language and as a lingua franca and by the position of Standard Arabic as a non-native language. Moroccan Arabic seems to have appropriated some of the functions which were performed by Amazighe. The results of the 2024 population census indicate that the number of Amazighe speakers in the country has dropped to 25% of the 38 million population of Morocco instead of 27% in the population census of 2014 (Worldometer, 2025). The following review is structured around the following themes, viz., competition between languages, the position of French and English and the question of management.

Competition between languages

The conflict between the languages in use in Morocco is strongly perceived in the field of education where Amazighe continues to be used only as an optional language. Its teaching continues to be a burden for both teachers and learners, who show their dissatisfaction about the small teaching load which is allotted to Amazighe in primary education and the evident disinterest shown towards learning this language by both parents and learners.

The situation of Amazighe teaching in Morocco testifies of a tacit ideology which maintains an awkward situation in which the language is officially introduced in education but, at the same time, is not taught in all primary schools in which it is expected to be taught. As Auerbach (1995) observes, "pedagogical choices about curriculum development, content, materials, classroom processes, and language use, although appearing to be informed by apolitical professional considerations, are, in fact, inherently ideological in nature, with significant implications for learners' socioeconomic roles" (Auerbach, 1995: 9).

Ennaji (2002) points out the existence in Morocco of a situation of "conflict and rivalry", the result of "the functions and status" of the languages used in the country. He considers that Amazighe, Moroccan Arabic, Standard Arabic, French, Spanish and English are viewed by speakers as markers of identity. Speakers consider that their use of these languages expresses their own identity and their membership to a particular culture which is carried by these languages. This situation does not entail any national or linguistic conflict but seems to provide a propitious setting for identity and culture conflict.

Loutfi (2020) indicates that while his respondents show preference for Standard Arabic as a symbol of their identity, classroom observation shows that Moroccan Arabic is widely used as the medium of instruction in both the primary and secondary levels of education. Contrary to the findings of many studies on language in Morocco, Loutfi (2020) affirms that "Moroccans' attitudes towards their mother tongues are not that strong, if not negative. The majority of the respondents appear to disfavour the idea of introducing mother tongues in education on the grounds that these languages might devalue the status of Arabic" (Loutfi, 2020: 9).

Commenting on the use of Arabic in education in Morocco, Rhomari and Benmesaoud (2020) observe that the policy of arabisation has failed mainly as a result of the choice of one language and "attrition and exclusion" of others. They state that "the choice of Arabic as the medium of instruction was more substantially informed by political and ideological considerations than purely educational ones, and was deeply controversial with issues of feasibility, popular expectations, and heterogeneous cultural idiosyncrasies that characterise Moroccan society" (Rhomari and Benmasoud, 2020: 37). The authors consider that learners' proficiency in primary, secondary and higher levels of education is "appalling" as a result of the chaotic management of multilingualism by the authorities.

The Position of French and English

French is maintained in the linguistic arena in Morocco as a language of prestige in education, administration, the media and economy. It seems that this language continues to benefit from the authorities' support to the disadvantage of the other languages. Some have tried to see the situation of French in Morocco otherwise, considering that it faces strong competition from English (Zouhir, 2008). Talking about the spread of English in Morocco, Sadiqi (1991) notes that the government's policy has greatly contributed to the expansion of this language in higher education and in certain economic circles.

The Question of Management

Ben Haman (2020) reviews the efforts made by the Moroccan authorities, assisted by world organisations like the World Bank, and concludes that education in Morocco is "structurally weak". The development policies adopted by the authorities are below the people's expectancies in many areas including education. This is due to poor support of scientific research on the part of the authorities and inadequate "academic environment in universities".

Within the same stream of ideas, Cheddadi (2011) describes the situation of multilingualism that prevails in Morocco as a situation of "linguistic insecurity" for both teachers and learners and points out that this insecurity has profoundly affected the learners' standards.

Daniel and Ball (2009) consider that the challenges of the linguistic situation in Morocco derive from the status of the languages in use in the country. Modern Standard Arabic, one of the official languages, is "not spoken by the majority of the citizens". Its use in education equates it to a second language, which is an awkward situation. The authors consider that the authorities' plans to implement an educational policy which seeks to achieve literacy in the home languages, Standard Arabic and, at least, two foreign languages, is highly "demanding both pedagogically and financially".

It is interesting to point out here that the situation of languages in Morocco described in this review could benefit from further research on the status of the vernacular languages, Amazighe and Moroccan Arabic and their legitimacy to be used as languages of instruction in school. It could also benefit from research into the efforts that are being made to introduce Amazighe in the system of education through addressing both the equivocal position of the officials in this regard and the poor management of the policies that are being carried out.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is undertaken within the sociolinguistic theory, more specifically within the framework of language planning and language policy, which examines the way linguistic diversity, language in education and language practices are managed. It draws particularly on Fishman's language planning and language policy (1972), which addresses the problems of language maintenance and revitalisation through sustained effort in education in particular. The present study addresses some of the problems of teaching Amazighe and Arabic today in Morocco within the framework of the ongoing policy of arabisation. It attempts to consider a number of language issues in Morocco through a targeted elicitation of the views of a group of 35 male and female teachers and officials about the way the authorities manage linguistic diversity in the country and the teaching of Arabic and French.

The type of sampling that is used to select the interviewees is purposive, which means that their selection is justified by the existence of specific characteristics. They are all involved in matters of education either as teachers or as administrators in educational institutions. They have a

sound knowledge of the intricacies of the linguistic situation in Morocco. They have experienced language problems both in the classroom and in the administration in charge of teaching. This type of purposive sampling allows to gather relevant and realistic data, notwithstanding the possible bias of subjective reactions from some of the interviewees. The data which are used for the purpose of this study are collected through short and casual interviews. The information elicited is put down on paper immediately after the interview and is exploited later. The choice of short and casual interviews is accounted for by the natural and spontaneous situation of the exchange between the researcher and the interviewees who are allowed to express their views about the language problems in education away from any sort of written medium, formal setting and recording material.

Language Issues

The situation of multilingualism which exists in Morocco has given rise to a number of issues of which the following are mentioned by the interviewees as the most salient ones: failure of the process of arabisation, poor language policy and lack of political decision concerning linguistic management, poor Arabic teaching, low standards in French learning, difficulty in Amazighe teaching. A battery of five questions is used to elicit the views of the interviewees about these issues. These questions are as follows:

1: What is your evaluation of the policy of arabisation?

2: What are the impediments of arabisation?

3: What are the main ills of arabisation in teaching?

4: How do you evaluate the teaching of French?

5: How do you evaluate the teaching of Amazighe?

The Policy of Arabisation

Table 1: What is your Evaluation of the Policy of Arabisation?

Evaluation	Number	%
Arabisation is a success	2	5.71%
Arabiation is a failure	28	80%
Mixed views	5	14.28%
Total	**35**	**100%**

First, it should be said that the language policy that has been implemented by the authorities since the sixties of the last century has been reduced to the efforts made to arabise education, administration and the public life. One of the characteristics of the Moroccan linguistic situation in relation to language policy after independence is to be found in the constant efforts to bring about the supremacy of the Arabic language and to weaken the use of French. These are, in fact, the two core principles of arabisation, which has taken different aspects such as arabisation of science, translation of scientific and literary subjects from foreign languages into Arabic, use of Arabic as the sole medium of instruction in school, unification of terminology, use of Arabic in administration, commerce and industry, etc. Immediately after independence, the authorities introduced a number of laws which aimed at arabising education and a number of public life activities.

In what follows, and for ease of reference, the views of the interviewees are expressed together with statistical information between parentheses, indicating the number of interviewees who express their views and their percentage in relation to their total number.

Most of the interviewees (28/80%) consider that the policy of arabisation is a total failure. Very few interviewees (2/5.71%) see it as a success, advocating a policy of total arabisation and a return to the traditional schools in which French would be totally absent. The rest of the interviewees (5/14.28%) have expressed mixed opinions about arabisation, saying that it has contributed to the enforcement of the Moroccan Arab identity but, at the same time, has not been able to eradicate many of the problems in education.

The views which advocate total arabisation are expressed by mainstreamers, i. e., people who conform to the mainstream and advocate a return to the traditional schools in which French would be absent. These people are basically motivated by their strong support of the Arabic-Muslim culture in Morocco. Overall, they are of the view that arabisation should be considered more as a political rather than an economic or cultural problem. They consider the use of French as a sequel of colonisation and the use of Arabic as a marker of the country's identity and a pledge to preserve Morocco's membership to the Arab World.

The interviewees who express unfavourable views about arabisation and consider it as a failure say they are more concerned with an education which would ensure the desired economic advance of the country and its position among the great industrialised nations. These are advocators of modernity, for whom the question of arabisation is a secondary concern that should not constitute a priority in the authorities' plans for the development of the country. These interviewees declare that they are aware of the backward situation of education in Morocco and that officials should go past the project of arabisation to address more urgent problems pertaining to local development.

Here, it should be said that the linguistic situation in Morocco is a peculiar one. While the country's constitution stipulates that Arabic, along with Amazighe, is an official language, the everyday reality sometimes excludes the use of Arabic in favour of French, which is still used in certain areas of higher education, tourism, economy, etc. This situation legitimises a state of bilingualism whereby the foreign language has a great share in education, administration and economy while Modern Standard Arabic is most often banned from certain domains like higher scientific education and research and advanced economic and technological sectors. These latter are still dominated by the use of the foreign language.

Impediments to Arabisation

Table 2: What are the Impediments to Arabisation?

Impediment	Number	%
Structure of Arabic	21	60%
Poor management	10	28.57%
Lack of involvement of officials	4	11.42%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The interviewees' answers to this question reveal that the impediments which have hampered the process of arabisation have to do with both the Arabic language itself and the management of the policy of arabisation by the authorities. A fair majority of the interviewees (21/60%) see that the structure of Standard Arabic, the language that is chosen for arabisation, suffers from a number of ills. They believe that the vocabulary of Standard Arabic is "difficult to learn" as a

result of an abundant number of synonyms in it and that the language is "difficult to read" because it does not possess scripts for vocalisation. Some of these interviewees also consider that the methods which are used to teach Standard Arabic are "unscientific" and "outmoded". They think that the decisions relating to arabisation are not motivated by pedagogical considerations and that the officials are concerned about the preservation of the existing system fearing that a total implementation of arabisation will bring about a drop in the standards in education. They think that these officials are often ignorant of the linguistic reality of the country.

It should be said here that these impediments are, indeed, well known to the researchers in the field of language planning in Morocco. They have been constantly rehashed by the media and often discussed in scientific meetings about Arabic. However, the impediments which are mentioned by the interviewees are to be taken with caution. It is well known that languages cannot be described as "difficult", "easy", "corrupt" or "beautiful" as these attributes derive from pure value judgements. Languages are simply different. Lack of vocalisation may be a burden for young learners but the difficulty with it is often overcome through rote learning, reading and practice.

A fairly small number of the interviewees, (10/28.57%) are of the view, that the most serious hindrances to arabisation are not linguistic. They are the result of poor management of the process of arabisation. The whole process has been taken charge of by the authorities away from the rest of the population while no elicitation of opinion about this phenomenon has ever been made among the population. An elicitation survey of this kind is likely to shed light on how people really view arabisation.

In this regard, it should be said that arabisation is sometimes discussed in the media, in academic circles and among the cultural elite, in general. However, due to its unofficial nature, this type of discussion cannot be considered as a move towards a real endeavour to implement a sound policy which would ensure an efficient use of Arabic in the various domains of life in the country. It is also often pointed out that the policy makers in charge of arabisation have not even gone as far as to take a clear and unequivocal political decision on the issue, much the same as with the use of Moroccan Arabic in education and the distinction between the two varieties of Arabic in the literature about arabisation. Indeed, the absence of a clear political decision concerning the process of arabisation, the absence of an official decision concerning the use of Moroccan Arabic in the classroom and the hazy relationship between the words "Arabic" and "Moroccan Arabic" in the official discourse about language planning are considered as latent and persisting problems in the linguistic literature in Morocco.

A minority of the interviewees (4/11.42%) indicate a certain "lack of" involvement on the part of the decision makers and the political and social intelligentsia in the country, whose interests are said to be so closely dependent on the former colonial power and its language that any replacement of this latter by Arabic is resisted. These decision makers and the political and social intelligentsia are not convinced of the benefits of arabisation because some of them still have preconceived ideas about Arabic, which, according to them, is not able to cope with scientific and technical matters. This attitude is most often coupled with a divergence in thinking, which is itself the result of party and group allegiances. In other words, it can be said that the policy of arabisation is also influenced by various political loyalties and group allegiances which interfere with the official decisions.

Arabisation in Teaching

Table 3: What are the Main Malfunctions of Arabisation in Teaching?

Malfunction	Number	%
Poor teaching methods	32	91.42%
Obsolete curricula	3	8.57%
Total	**35**	**100%**

Most interviewees (32/91.42%) think that the methods of teaching Arabic are archaic and inefficient. These methods are based on the structural approach that aims to teach linguistic forms and grammar points to the learner and make him memorise them by means of structural drills. A small minority of interviewees (3/8.57%) believe that the teaching of Arabic is associated with obsolete curricula and traditional content especially in the primary level of education. They note that, despite efforts that have been made to include new forms of writing, such as technical and media writing, into the curriculum, much is left to be done. The interviewees indicate the low prestige of Arabic at a time when foreign languages like French and English enjoy increased prestige in the work market.

These opinions call for some comments. Arabic is taught as a language in the primary, secondary and higher levels of education. Most often, its teaching involves writing and reading skills. Less importance is given to comprehension and speaking. Learners are encouraged to internalise rules of grammar and use them correctly in writing. They are expected to acquire a grammatical competence, which means that their communicative competence is not considered as an objective in itself. The teaching methods that are used to teach Arabic are, in fact, traditional methods which are easy to apply but do not yield pedagogical gains for the learners. The type of Arabic that is taught to the learners is the standard variety, the other varieties being banned from the curriculum. In this regard, it is interesting to recall that the use of the standard variety of Arabic in society is limited to very restricted areas and that it is basically written. The spoken variety of Arabic, the mother tongue of more than half of the population and the one that is understood by the majority, is not taught. This, in itself, is another serious challenge because learners are taught a language which is not the one, they speak natively.

The Teaching of French

Table 4: How do you evaluate the Teaching of French?

Evaluation	Number	%
Low standards	29	82.85%
Lack of reading tradition	6	17.14%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The majority of interviewees (29/82.85%) consider that the learners' standards in French in both the primary and secondary levels, are far from being satisfactory. They indicate the lack of linguistic support outside the classroom and the competition with English as the main reasons behind this situation. A small minority of interviewees (6/17.14%) say that young learners in general do not read material written in French and are not encouraged to do so either. The invasive role of the social media is a serious reason why learners do not read. The interviewees observe that some learners may perform well when they communicate verbally in French but their abilities in writing this language are very insignificant.

A number of other difficulties are observed to hinder the teaching of French in Morocco. The feeble teaching load which is allotted to French in both primary and secondary levels of education is one of these difficulties. It is reported that a weekly load of 6 hours of teaching French in the primary level is not sufficient. Additionally, even this load is not always respected by teachers. Most often the French course is, so to speak, "instructed" in Moroccan Arabic and teachers justify this awkward situation by the learners' low level of proficiency in French. It is also said that learners of French are deprived of language support outside the classroom as a result of lack of parental involvement and difficulty to practice the language.

The Teaching of Amazighe

Table 5: How do you evaluate the Teaching of Amazighe?

Evaluation	Number	%
Optional nature of learning	26	74.28%
Officials' reluctance	9	25.71%
Total	**35**	**100%**

The interviewees' evaluations of Amazighe in school all revolve around the existence of serious difficulties in the way this language is taught. Most of them (26/74.28%) agree that the optional nature of learning this language is the main reason behind these difficulties. In the Amazighe course, attendance is not mandatory and examinations are not valued. A small group of interviewees (9/25.71%) consider that the officials in charge of education are reluctant when it comes to taking serious action to carry out a sound project of Amazighe teaching.

To understand the interviewees' views here, it should be said that it is only in 1999 that the National Education Charter mentioned for the first time the authorities' intention to "open up on the Amazighe language and culture". As a result, the regional educational authorities were encouraged to include the teaching of Amazighe in the curricula.

Following a royal decree issued in October 2007, the Royal Institute for Amazighe Culture (IRCAM) was created. A new strategy was initiated based on the recognition of the diverse nature of the components of the Moroccan culture and the primordial position held by Amazighe in this culture. The new strategy involves a number of assertions, chief of which are the recognition of Amazighe as a fundamental component of the Moroccan civilisation shared by all members of the population, the development of the Amazighe culture as a national affair with a view to achieving the necessary conditions to establish the "Constitutional State" and the "democratisation of the country".

The mission that is assigned to the Royal Institute for Amazighe Culture is basically that of providing the necessary technical and scientific means to promote the Amazighe language with the aim to introduce it in the educational system, the media and the field of scientific research. The Institute can pride itself on a number of achievements in the fields of education, the media and the public life. Thus, in collaboration with the Ministry of education, the Institute has initiated a large programme for the development of Amazighe and its use in education through its codification in terms of the choice of the Tifinagh script, the preparation of the curricula, the publication of textbooks and grammars, teacher training, the use of Amazighe in the media and the creation of an Amazighe television channel.

However, this corpus planning has not contributed much to the teaching of the language. In addition to the optional nature of the Amazighe course, a number of hindrances can be mentioned. Qualified teachers are still missing. The teaching load is very low. Learners and

teachers are allowed a 30-minute course every week, which is insignificant. Some headmasters and pedagogical officials are still reluctant to accept the feasibility of teaching Amazighe.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has investigated some of the most prominent language issues in Morocco through the views of a group of teachers and officials. The areas which are considered are the policy of arabisation, impediments to arabisation, arabisation in teaching, the teaching of French and the teaching of Amazighe. The policy of arabisation is viewed as a fiasco because it has failed to meet the objectives set by the decision makers in terms of making Arabic the language of education, administration, commerce and the public life in general. Moroccan Arabic and French are gaining ground in these fields. The policy of arabisation has been hindered by a number of impediments relating to the structure of the Arabic language itself, poor management on behalf of the policy makers, their lack of serious involvement and their latent reluctance to see the feasibility of the whole process. Arabisation in primary and secondary levels of education endures a number of malfunctions as a result of poor teaching methods and obsolete curricula. The teaching of French is affected by low standards of proficiency among learners as a result, notably, of lack of a tradition of reading. The teaching of Amazighe seems to be hindered by the officials' reluctance to accept the rightness of developing this language and by its optional nature as a subject in school.

It is suggested here that at least two moves should be made towards providing a remedy for the present-day situation of languages in Morocco. First, the official status of Amazighe should be activated through providing the necessary legal documentation in this regard. Second, the position of the official authorities about Modern Standard Arabic and Moroccan Arabic should be revisited towards eradicating the amalgam that continues to affect their respective roles in the system of education.

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