

Arabic or Latin: Language Contact and Script Practices

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This study discusses the social aspects of script reforms and the hierarchies attached to languages and scripts in contact. In Morocco, Arabic, French, and Amazigh/Berber compete for similar social domains. In recent years, intense debates have taken place surrounding the official adoption of Tifinagh to codify Amazigh; however, less focus has been placed on the unofficial selection of the French-based Latin characters to write

both Arabic and Amazigh. This study argues that, besides practicality, preference for the Latin script in Morocco is ideologically connected to the status of French as a language that indexes power, modernity, and social prestige.

Keywords: Writing systems, Language contact, Language ideologies, French, Arabic, Amazigh/Berber

Introduction

Recent research in sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology has focused on language choice and oral contact between spoken languages (Garrett 20; Blom and Gumperz 421; Zentella 87; Makihara 49-54). Less focus has been placed on scripts in contact and the social dimensions of script selections. Scripts or orthographies¹ are not a simple codification of language sounds. They are shaped less by the phonological fact of language than by social and cultural factors (Sebba, *Contact languages* 249). The development of a particular script for a spoken language has been neither a neutral activity nor a simple search to represent the sounds of a specific language (Schieffelin and Doucet 285).

Previous work on scripts has demonstrated the ways in which writing systems are connected to social constructions (Sebba, "Sociolinguistic Approaches"; *Spelling and Society*, and Unseth, "The Sociolinguistics of Script Choice"). Drawing on this theoretical framework, this study discusses the social and ideological dimensions of script reforms. It considers script reforms as a social phenomenon embedded within different ideological practices that index both ethnic identity and political orientation

(Unseth 24). This is illustrated by examples from the official Amazigh/Berber codification in Morocco. In recent years, political and ideological debates have taken place regarding the official adoption of Tifinagh² to codify Amazigh; however, less focus has been placed on the unofficial selection of the French-based Latin characters to write both Arabic and Amazigh. This study also gauges different language and script uses and preferences in Morocco in daily technology-related communication, including in emails and text messages. The quantitative part of the study aims at exploring the extent to which script preferences are determined by utility and practicality or culture and ideology.

Script Reforms

The post-colonial era has witnessed the creation of new states as well as new languages (Philips 486-487). Countries that are subject to occupation often witness a forced contact between different languages, which results in code reorganization. Some forms of language become highly valued (Bourdieu 38), while other forms, such as language mixing, become devalued (Kroskirty 108). A clear example of this forced contact is post-colonial Haiti, which has seen the emergence of a new language, namely Haitian Kreyòl. Different options were available for writing Haitian

Kreyòl: either phonemically, pro-etymologically (i.e., reflecting its French origins), or a combination of the two options (Schieffelin and Doucet 186-187). Selecting a unified orthography for Haitian Kreyòl has been a divisive issue in the country. This divide, as Schieffelin and Doucet (249) note, is motivated by multiple ideologies, which inhibit the promotion of the language in key areas such as literacy and education.

Other languages have witnessed comparable debates. In Azerbaijan, for example, the Azeri script underwent multiple changes, depending on the sociopolitical conditions in the country and the influence exerted by neighboring nations. Hence, Iran backed the Arabic script, while Turkey supported the Latin alphabet. Soviet Russia pushed for adopting first the Latin and then the Cyrillic script. For Hatcher (106), the shift from Arabic to Latin script was enforced by the Soviets' attempt to cut the cultural and religious ties between Azerbaijan and Muslim Iran. Similarly, in Wertheim's view, the Soviets' goal was to "reorient... nationalities away from outside influences, in particular [from] Muslims in the rest of the world, who were still using Arabic orthography" (112). A subsequent reform took place when Azerbaijan adopted the Cyrillic

script instead of the Latin script. The most recent change took place after independence in 1991, when the Azeris chose again the Latin script, which, as Hatcher writes, conforms to the script used in other Turkic republics and in Turkey and constitutes "an essential step in building their identity" (107). Thus Azeris, with their choice of an alphabet nearly identical to the one used by Anatolian Turks, seem to be aligning themselves with Turkey and the West and away from both Russia and their Soviet past.

Scripts also embody the struggle against colonial powers. In West Africa, a Guinean trader and self-taught Muslim educator created a new script named N'ko in the 1940s to transcribe the Maninka and Mande languages (Oyler 87-90). The N'ko script, as Wyrod (31-35) notes, developed during the French colonial period as a form of resistance to the French power that promoted the use of French language and supported the Latin script in codifying African languages. The script was created to be independent, indexing West African populations' aspirations for freedom.

Scripts in Morocco

Morocco is a land with linguistic complexity, in which a number of languages and varieties are in contact. Standard Arabic

(SA) is the language of education, news, newspapers, and formal speech. Moroccan Arabic (MA), also referred to as *darja*, meaning a dialect, is the mother tongue for arabophone Moroccans. The French language entered Morocco officially in 1912 when France first colonized the country, and it continued to expand even after Morocco's 1956 independence. Additionally, multiple varieties of Amazigh are in contact with Arabic in the country. Amazigh refers to a number of related Berber varieties in the Hamito-Semitic sub-family of Afro-Asiatic languages. These varieties are spoken in discontinuous areas along the southern Mediterranean, from Siwa in Egypt to Morocco, as well as in parts of sub-Saharan African countries like Mali and Niger. Different Amazigh groups include the Kabyles, Mozabites, and Chaouis in Algeria and the Tuareg in the Sahara and sub-Saharan regions. In Morocco, at least three Amazigh varieties are spoken. The first is *Tarifit*, a variety in the northern mountainous area. Heading south, a second variety named *Tamazight* stretches along the middle Atlas and the southeast. Further south and west is the domain of the third variety, *Tashelhit*. Amazigh with its variants has been mainly an oral language. In describing Amazigh, O'Connor states, "the Berber languages have never



Fig. 1: Tifinagh Script³ (Source: written by the author)

regularly been used as written languages" (112), noting, however, that some "Berber texts written in Arabic script are known from the 12th century C.E. on" (115) and that these are mostly religious texts.

As for scripts, three writing systems are now in use in Morocco, namely the Arabic script, the Latin script, and Tifinagh. The Arabic script is used in literacy and the different formal domains occupied by Standard Arabic. The French-based Latin script covers areas in which the French language is utilized, including technology and science. Tifinagh, which has been adopted recently as the official script for Amazigh, is used in a very limited way, thus struggling in a competitive sociolinguistic landscape of writing systems in the country. Adoption of this script followed intense debates between different groups with complex affiliations. As will be discussed below, the debates proved to be

more political and ideological than merely linguistic (Soulaïmani 5-7).

The Amazigh script debate

Morocco has witnessed a debate between different groups over the selection of a single script to codify Amazigh. The choice was between the Arabic script, the Latin script, or Tifinagh, an ancient script believed to have been used by Berbers in the past. However, as Cline notes, "If Libyan writing [Tifinagh] was ever used in long documents, no trace of them remains" (273). In the script debate, linguistic and historical factors have not been separated from political and ideological conflicts. While each group claims that their choice is logical, their selections were actually motivated by different ideological, cultural, or political viewpoints. In addition, the selection process certainly involved questions of identity and linguistic differentiation.



Fig. 2 Government sign in Arabic, Amazigh, and French (Source: photo taken by the author)

The debate over script embodies the political struggle between two main groups: francophones who supported Latin script and Nationalists and Islamists who favored Arabic script (Soulaïmani 10). Tifinagh was not an option in the beginning. Supporters of Latin script saw their selection as a tool for facilitating communication with the outside world and an opportunity to easily access global information, including the latest technologies. Those who supported Arabic script focused on the cultural and linguistic properties shared by Arabic and Amazigh. Supporters of Tifinagh, however, argue

that their script is a significant component of the Amazigh social identity and their linguistic specificity. In the end, the government selected Tifinagh as an official script, perhaps to avoid an imminent clash between Arabic supporters and Latin supporters.

Beyond the official

To contextualize the script situation in Morocco, this study incorporates questionnaire results based on a larger data set that was gathered in Morocco in 2011. The data included 460 surveys with college students in both arabophone and berberphone areas. The study gauges participants' views, proficiency, preferences, and attitudes toward the different scripts in contact in Morocco. The surveys provide quantifiable information that shows the extent to which scripts are used in daily written communication. The original survey comprised 60 wide-ranging questions, including demographic information like gender, age, residence, and language and script use, proficiency, and preferences, as well as sections for additional comments. The analysis below focuses on the following survey items: 1) the language(s) used in personal emails, 2) the language(s) used in SMS, 3) the script(s) used in personal emails, 4) the script(s) used in SMS.

Analysis

The status of Latin script is intertwined with the status structure of the French language in Morocco. Today, French plays an important socio-political role in the country. It is the primary language in some government departments, including the Ministries of Tourism and Finance. Road signs are primarily in Arabic and French, while documents such as bank statements are exclusively in French. There is an inextricable connection between the French language and technology and science. French is the language in which scientific courses are taught at universities. This usually puts at a disadvantage most students who use Arabic in studying these subjects during their pre-college education. Recently, heated debates have intensified between supporters of French and supporters of Arabic over the use of French as a medium of instruction. In July 2019, however, the Moroccan parliament passed a controversial law that requires teaching science- and technology-related courses in a foreign language (i.e., French) at all levels (Aqdim). Thus, French, once seen as the language of the occupier, still possesses power in the country, providing access to economic and educational privileges.

The language(s) I use	French	MA	SA	Amazigh
Personal Email	61.6%	55.4%	21.3%	13.7%
SMS	56.1%	62.2%	11.3%	15.7%

Fig. 3: Language Use (Source: Surveys distributed by the author in 2011)

The script(s) I use	Latin Script	Arabic Script	Tifinagh Script
Personal Email	65.5%	29.1%	3%
SMS	68.9%	21.7%	11.5%

Fig. 4: Script Use (Source: Surveys distributed by the author in 2011)

Moreover, French is considered the language of social status and modernity (Bentahila 98 and Chakrani 218). Locally, it is viewed as “linguistic capital” that produces “a profit of distinction,” indexing social value and privilege (Bourdieu 55). Hence, preference for French most likely symbolizes alignment with a higher social class, modernity, and prestige (Chakrani 218 and Soulaïmani 9-13).

This view of French and its Latin script is reflected in the questionnaire results presented below. In the questionnaires, the participants were asked about the languages and scripts they use in their personal emails and text messages. The answer options included one or more of the following languages: French, Moroccan Arabic (MA), Standard Arabic

(SA), or Amazigh, and one or more of the following scripts: Latin script, Arabic script, or Tifinagh script.

With regard to the language used to write personal emails, the data shows that French comes first with 61.6%, followed by Moroccan Arabic with 55.4%, then Standard Arabic with 21.3%, and finally Amazigh with 13.7%. This ranking changes slightly for text messages, with an increase to 62.2 percent in the number of participants who use Moroccan Arabic. Here, French comes second with 56.1%, followed by Amazigh with 15.7% and Standard Arabic with 11.3%. These numbers indicate that both French and Moroccan Arabic are generally used more frequently than Standard Arabic or Amazigh in emailing and texting.

These results can be contextualized, taking into account the close connection between the French language and technology in the country. The high score of French can also be attributed to the ideological association between French and highly valued social properties, such as modernity and prestige. The high rate of use of Moroccan Arabic especially in texting can be explained considering the diglossic nature of Arabic, where Standard Arabic is a written form used in formal domains, while the dialect, Moroccan Arabic, is mainly oral, informal, and connected with daily conversations. Texting, then, as a form of daily communication, can be a domain of the dialect. Amazigh scored low, although, like Moroccan Arabic, it is a mainly oral language. This score might derive from its generally low status in the country. This view, however, has been changing with the initiation of its codification in 2003 and its inclusion in the Moroccan constitution as an official language in 2011.

Scripts show usage hierarchies comparable to those of languages. According to the survey, the French-based Latin script is used more frequently than Arabic script or Tifinagh script. Hence, in writing personal emails, Latin script comes first with 65.5%, followed by Arabic script with 29.1% and

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Tifinagh with only 3%. The data also indicates that Arabic content, whether MA or SA, in texting and emailing is transcribed more in Latin script than in Arabic script. The high score of the Latin alphabet can be attributed to an earlier shortage of technological equipment, such as keyboards or keypads, with Arabic script on them and the scarcity of similar technology that facilitates the use of Tifinagh script. For example, pre-smartphone cell-phone devices in Morocco mostly lacked Arabic script. The increasing use of Latin script can also be linked to the ideological representation of French-based Latin script, a writing system that indexes modernity, openness, and social prestige, among other things.

Conclusion

The languages discussed in this paper show that a letter is not merely a sign that represents a certain sound; it is also a sign that represents identity and a particular ideology. N'ko script came as a reaction to French occupation and was employed to counter the French presence in West Africa. In Azerbaijan, selection of the Latin alphabet points to the significance of orthography as a way of showing affiliation with, or differentiation from, a certain group, community, or nation. Similarly, the case of Tifinagh script in the Moroccan

context displays the work of ideology and the complexities of identity. Tifinagh is seen by many as a political decision for a linguistic issue. This is one of the semiotic processes that attest that linguistic structure and real-life language use are connected. All examples of script selections discussed in this paper, although from geographically diverse areas, are remarkably comparable. This is because the macro-social circumstances often lead to similar micro-social effects. The representation of scripts is usually intertwined with other social, political, and cultural dimensions. Beyond the official decisions, practicality also plays a role in language or script selections. Participants (college students) in this study seem to use the French language and Latin script more frequently in their emails and text messages. In contrast, Tifinagh script and the Amazigh language seem to be the least-preferred options for writing. This indicates hierarchical social relations between the Arabic, French, and Amazigh languages, on the one hand, and Arabic, Latin, and Tifinagh scripts, on the other.

Notes

¹ The terms script, orthography, and writing system will be used in this paper to refer to any written representation of a spoken language.

² Tifinagh is a script based on ancient signs discovered in various historical sites in North Africa (Prasse).

³ Tifinagh script standardized by IRCAM (the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture) in Morocco.

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