

# Linguistic Sacrifice: The Moroccan Case

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*Note: This research was conducted independently and is not affiliated with Eastern Washington University.*

## Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of linguistic sacrifice in Morocco, focusing on Moroccan Darija and its Amazigh roots. It examines how Moroccans modify their speech to accommodate Arabic speakers, reflecting historical Arabization, cultural identity, and sociopolitical dynamics.

## Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a marker of identity, history, and social hierarchy. For the Amazigh people, language is a vital marker they are fighting to preserve in the face of powerful forces that threaten not only their language but their entire civilization. This paper explores the complex linguistic landscape of Morocco, focusing on Moroccan Darija—a language often mislabeled as a dialect of Arabic but which, in reality, is a distinct linguistic system shaped by a rich interplay of Tamazight, Arabic, French, and Spanish influences.

At the heart of this discussion is the phenomenon of *linguistic sacrifice*: the conscious and unconscious adjustments Moroccans make when speaking to others, particularly to Arabs from the Middle East. These adjustments reflect both an exaggerated linguistic accommodation and a deeper socio-psychological phenomenon rooted in historical Arabization and an ingrained inferiority complex. This paper argues that linguistic sacrifice is more than a simple act of hospitality or clarity—it is a reflection of historical, cultural, and political forces that prioritize Arab identity over Morocco's indigenous linguistic heritage.

By examining the Amazigh roots of Moroccan Darija, the dynamics of linguistic accommodation, and the societal attitudes that devalue Darija and Tamazight, this paper seeks to shed light on the broader implications of linguistic sacrifice for Morocco's cultural and linguistic identity.

## The Evolution of Moroccan Darija and its Amazigh roots:

Moroccan Darija is the product of centuries of linguistic evolution, shaped by the intertwinement of Tamazight, Arabic, Spanish, and French. This unique blend has resulted in a language that requires familiarity with all these languages to be fully understood. While Darija is sometimes seen as a threat to Tamazight, its relationship with Amazigh languages is far more nuanced than a simple rivalry. Tamazight has deeply influenced Darija in phonology, syntax, and vocabulary, making it distinct from what is often mistakenly labeled as “Arabic.” However, due to historical Arabization and prevailing language attitudes, these Amazigh influences are frequently overlooked or downplayed.

Although Moroccan Darija contains a significant Arabic lexicon, its grammatical structure, syntax, and phonology are heavily influenced by Amazigh languages. This structural difference makes Darija difficult to understand for Arabic speakers from the Middle East, even when familiar vocabulary is present. For instance, word order in Darija often mirrors Tamazight rather than Arabic syntax, and the consonant clusters characterized by omitted vowels common in Tamazight and Darija—are absent in Arabic.

One of the most striking ways Tamazight influences Moroccan Darija is through literal translations (calques) of Amazigh expressions. These translations often preserve Tamazight syntax and conceptual framing, making them incomprehensible or strange to native Arabic speakers from the Middle East, even though the words themselves may be Arabic. These features create a linguistic disconnect, despite the lexical similarities between Darija and Arabic. Additionally, Moroccan Darija incorporates a substantial number of loanwords from French and Spanish, further complicating comprehension for Arabic speakers.

### **Linguistic Sacrifice: Accommodating for Others**

In response to these challenges, Moroccans frequently modify their speech when communicating with non-Moroccans, particularly with Arabs from the Middle East. This adjustment often involves:

- Avoiding or simplifying Amazigh-influenced syntactic structures.
- Replacing common Darija words of Amazigh origin with Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) equivalents.
- Minimizing French and Spanish loanwords in favor of Arabic.
- Adjusting pronunciation to align with widely understood Arabic dialects.

While these adaptations facilitate communication, they also represent a form of linguistic compromise that gradually alters Moroccan Darija, pushing it toward greater Arabization.

### **Reasons Behind Linguistic Sacrifice**

Despite being a product of Tamazight's linguistic evolution, Darija itself is undergoing significant changes—changes that are often unappreciated by those who value Morocco's indigenous cultural and linguistic heritage.

This section explores how these adjustments reflect both an exaggerated linguistic accommodation and a deeper socio-psychological phenomenon rooted in historical Arabization and an ingrained inferiority complex. The Linguistic sacrifice taking place can be attributed to several reasons. Ideological reasons, inferiority complex and language attitudes, and finally economic and social pressure.

### **1) Ideological reasons and Arabization**

The process of linguistic accommodation is not merely about being hospitable or clear; it has long-term implications for the evolution of Moroccan Darija. Historically, speakers of Tamazight made similar linguistic accommodations, contributing to the slow erosion of their native language in urban areas and the emergence of Darija. Today, the constant attempts to accommodate Arab speakers and the tendency to cater to others contribute to the decline and removal of Amazigh linguistic structures within Darija.

This phenomenon serves as an extension of the broader historical Arabization policies that have sought to marginalize Amazigh languages and cultures in favor of a dominant Arab identity. The shift is not purely linguistic but also political and cultural, reinforcing narratives that equate Arab identity with prestige and modernity. While it may seem that Moroccans accommodate foreigners by choice, these changes are often the result of subtle pressures—social, economic, and ideological—that shape the way people adapt over time.

### **2) Inferiority complex and language attitudes :**

A key underlying factor in linguistic sacrifice is the inferiority complex that many Moroccans harbor regarding their native language varieties. Moroccan Darija is often perceived as an informal, unsophisticated language lacking the prestige of Classical Arabic or even other Arabic dialects. This perception stems from several historical and sociopolitical factors:

- The association of MSA with religious authority, scholarship, and government.
- The colonial legacy that positioned French as the language of education and economic power.
- Internalized linguistic hierarchies that devalue Tamazight and Moroccan dialectal speech.
- Darija being the language of the common people

Many Moroccans unconsciously equate linguistic prestige with Arabic (particularly MSA) and French, and by extension, the broader Arab world. This results in an excessive willingness to modify Darija to cater to Arabic speakers, not simply out of hospitality or politeness but from a deeper-seated belief that Moroccan linguistic identity is secondary or inferior.

## **The Case of Nouredine Ayouch and Public Education**

Nouredine Ayouch, a notable Moroccan businessman and philanthropist, organized an international conference, *Le Chemin de la Réussite* (The Path to Success), in 2013. One of the key recommendations proposed was to implement a standardized version of Darija as the language of instruction in early education, with a gradual transition to Standard Arabic in later grades. The rationale was that many Moroccan children struggle in school because they are taught in a language they do not speak at home.

Despite its practical rationale, this recommendation sparked significant backlash. Critics accused Ayouch of undermining Morocco's "Arabic and Islamic identity," highlighting the deep-seated resistance to valuing Darija as a legitimate language of education.

## **Public Attitudes Toward Darija and Tamazight**

Numerous studies have documented the negative attitudes many Moroccans hold toward their mother tongues—Darija and Tamazight. For example, Loutfi's 2020 study found that most respondents expressed negative attitudes toward Darija and Tamazight and disapproved of introducing them in education, fearing it would devalue the status of Arabic.

A 2018 article from the Moroccan news site Hespress about the use of Darija in public education sparked a heated debate. Approximately 47% of commenters opposed the use of Darija, arguing that Fusha Arabic is the language of the Quran, knowledge, and national unity. Around 33% supported the use of Darija, emphasizing that it is the mother tongue of most Moroccans and would make education more accessible. About 20% took a neutral stance or highlighted the importance of Tamazight as Morocco's true indigenous language. This division reflects the complex linguistic and cultural landscape of Morocco, where language remains a deeply contested issue.

## **Sociolinguistic and Psycholinguistic Perspectives**

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, linguistic sacrifice can be analyzed through Howard Giles' Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which examines how speakers modify their speech in response to social interactions. In the Moroccan context, this accommodation is asymmetrical—Moroccans adjust for others, but the reverse rarely occurs.

Psycholinguistically, this phenomenon ties into linguistic insecurity, where speakers feel their native variety is inferior or less prestigious. This insecurity leads to hypercorrection, code-switching, and even language shift over time. In the case of Moroccan Darija, these modifications contribute to the gradual dilution of its unique linguistic features.

## **Conclusion**

The linguistic sacrifice that Moroccans make when speaking to Arabs from the Middle East is more than just an adjustment for clarity, it is a reflection of historical Arabization, a deep-seated inferiority complex, and sociopolitical power dynamics. While linguistic adaptation is a natural

part of communication, the unidirectional nature of this accommodation raises concerns about the long-term impact on Moroccan linguistic identity. Recognizing and valuing the uniqueness of Moroccan Darija, alongside its Amazigh roots, is essential to preserving Morocco's rich linguistic heritage. Rather than viewing Darija as an informal or unsophisticated language, it should be embraced as a legitimate and dynamic linguistic system, worthy of pride and preservation.

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