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# Plurilingualism And The Dynamics Of French Varieties In The Maghreb: A Sociolinguistic Exploration

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### Abstract

This article explores linguistic diversity in the Maghreb, focusing on the different varieties of French present in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. It highlights the evolution and distinctive features of these varieties, as well as their interaction with local languages such as dialectal Arabic and Berber. Through an in-depth analysis of the sociolinguistic contexts and linguistic dynamics specific to each country, the article examines language proficiency levels, French usage practices, and the phenomenon of codic alternation. The historical, educational, and socio-cultural factors influencing these linguistic varieties are also taken into account. Despite attempts to maintain acrolectal French as the norm, there is a growing trend towards the use of more vernacular varieties that are better adapted to everyday communication contexts. Codic alternation emerges as a complex discourse strategy, integrating social, discursive, and identity-related motivations.

**Keywords:** linguistic diversity ; Maghreb ; code-switching ; French varieties ; multilingualism

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### Introduction

The sociolinguistic situation in the Maghreb is characterized by a remarkable linguistic diversity resulting from the interaction of several languages. This <sup>1</sup>linguistic plurality is reflected in the practice of bilingualism and diglossia, as well as in important symbolic issues closely linked to language dynamics.

*"In fact, the three Maghreb countries are faced with an "endemic" plurilingualism overloaded with the phenomenon of diglossia, even triglossia, and codic alternation: specialists speak of a linguistic space that suffers the tensions and conflicts of the presence of four to six languages from Tunisia to Morocco." (Bianchini, 2007: 3).*

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In this article, we explore the different varieties of French present in the Maghreb, highlighting their evolution and distinctive features. Through an in-depth analysis of the sociolinguistic contexts and linguistic dynamics specific to each country, we will examine how French interacts with local languages, notably dialectal Arabic and Berber, to form a rich and complex linguistic landscape.

Drawing on the work of specialist researchers such as Lanly (1962), Taleb-Ibrahimi (1995), Benzakour et al. (2000), Cheriguen (2002), Derradji (2002), Queffélec et al. (2002), Naffati & Queffélec (2004), Benzakour (2007, 2008, 2010), we will highlight the different levels of linguistic competence and usage practices in French, taking into account the historical, educational and socio-cultural factors that influence these linguistic varieties. In addition, we will explore the phenomenon of codic alternation, examining its motivations and discursive functions in the Maghreb context. In summary, this article aims to provide an in-depth perspective on the dynamics and diversity of French varieties in the sociolinguistic context of the Maghreb.

## 1. Algeria

The various forms of French present in Algeria are the result of continuous contact between this language and local languages. The use of French, both written and spoken, varies from one individual to another.

### 1.1. Basilectal French

Queffélec et al. assert that basilectal French is characteristic of two groups of speakers:

- A minority of adults benefited from an education reserved for natives during the colonial period and who could not even pass the *Certificate of Primary Education*.
- A large number of speakers whose schooling was in Arabic. For these individuals, learning French has been irregular and pedagogically unsatisfactory. What is more, the devaluation of the language has been accompanied by the policy of Arabization, leading to disruptions in the teaching of French (2002:119).

### 1.2. Mesolectal French

Speakers who have had more or less extensive education use this variety which, according to Queffélec et al. presents itself as an

*"Internal linguistic continuum where several sub-varieties of French are juxtaposed, with the lowest being close to the basilectal pole and the highest being near the acrolectal pole. It gradually forms into an endogenous norm of French, highly receptive to borrowing from local idioms [...] and is characterized by a clear tendency towards neology in form and meaning, which ensures remarkable vitality and dynamism."* (2002:120).

Mesolectal French is evident in journalistic writings and is prevalent among Algerian teachers and students.

### 1.3. Acrolectal French

Acrolectal French is characterized by its use by speakers with a very high level of education, particularly in formal communication contexts such as political meetings. It is important to note that acrolectal French can be replaced by the mesolectal variety, which is more in tune with the country's socio-economic reality. Queffélec et al. specify that *"in informal situations, it is replaced either by the mesolectal variety, which is looser and, above all, more in line with social and economic reality, or by codic alternation with Arabic"* (2002:121).

## 2. Morocco

A simple stroll through a Moroccan neighbourhood reveals that the French used is not restricted to the academic variety. On the contrary, there is a disproportionate mastery of different linguistic varieties.

### 2.1. Basilectal French

#### 2.1.1. Basilectal French for unschooled individuals

This language is acquired informally by uneducated individuals from very modest social backgrounds. They often work for French-speaking families in urban areas of the country. This population also includes retired members of the French army and others who have been in contact with native French speakers.

This type of French is characterized by phonetic differences, the use of simple terms, and a particular syntax.

#### 2.1.2. The basilectal French of Arabized literati

In this same variety, we note the emergence of a form of approximate French, used occasionally by students subject to the Arabization policy in restricted communication situations.

### 2.2. Mesolectal French: a variety that has become more familiar

Moroccan speakers are increasingly adopting this French to give it a regional touch. Benzakour et al. state that this variety of French is *"in linguistic contact, adapted to the local market and which has taken some liberty with the exogenous norm"* (2000:113).

Mesolectal French is characterized by distinctive accents and, above all, by lexical irregularity, with a wealth of lexical creations such as neologisms in terms of form and meaning. It is mainly used in the media and financial institutions despite the effective implementation of an Arabization policy in the administrative sector.

### 2.3. Acrolectal or elitist French

It is a French quality comparable to the exogenous model, specific to an urban elite that strives to preserve it. Commenting on this variety, Benzakour states that

*"Elite French [...] continues to monopolize the modern job market, to be the vehicle of science, technique, and new technologies. A language of social prestige, it is the property of the ruling social elite, the capital of senior managers in public affairs, directors of private companies or those with foreign capital contributions, senior executives in the administrative or private sectors."* (2007:53).

However, the use of acrolectal French is diminishing considerably with the emergence of simpler French, better suited to everyday communicative situations.

## 3. Tunisia

Naffati and Queffélec point out that "French in Tunisia is quite heterogeneous. There is not one French language but many, or rather different practices of French, which, we believe, are arranged along a double continuum." (2004:75).

- An intralinguistic continuum is situated between a wide variety of "acrolect," a median variety of "mesolect," and a low variety of "basilect."
- An interlinguistic continuum at the origin of a discourse resulting from a mix between Arabic and French. The field of use of the different varieties differs according to the communication code (oral and written): while in oral speech, the speaker moves freely from one variety to another, in written speech, he is obliged to use strictly mesolectal or acrolectal French.

All these varieties of French, with the exception of acrolect, can be more or less influenced by Tunisian Arabic. Whether in an academic or informal setting, learning French is often confronted with the intervention of the mother tongue, which can either positively facilitate learning or cause interference and errors in a negative way.

### 3.1. Basilectal French

Basilectal groups together various unstable variants of French, specific to speakers who learned the language in the field or whose schooling was prematurely interrupted.

In her doctoral thesis, Derbal explores several aspects of this variety of French. However, in their study, Naffati and Queffélec (2004) focus on just three of these aspects.

#### A. Phonological and phonetic

Interference errors are observed, as is essentially auditory learning, leading to altered morpheme perception. Vowel pronunciation errors are mainly attributable to differences between the phonological systems of French and Arabic. For example, the absence of nasal vowels in Arabic can lead to semantic or syntactic errors.

#### B. Morphosyntactic

According to experts, basilectal French is characterized by interference with the substrate and simplification of structures. The following example, in which the personal pronoun is absent, clearly illustrates the tendency to omit certain sentence elements. For example, « (Je) dis vérité à cause de famille » ["(I) tell the truth because of the family"] (Naffati and Queffélec, 2004:76).

#### C. Lexical

A limited lexicon, frequent use of semantic calques from Arabic, and multiple confusions characterize Basilectal French.

### 3.2. Mesolectal French

Mesolectal French is mainly used by speakers who have benefited from prolonged schooling and who continue to use this variety of French after their schooling, often for professional reasons, among others. Linguists note distinctive features in its oral use.

#### A. Phonetically

In contrast to basilectal French, Mesolectal French is less influenced by Arabic. Vowel pronunciation of "r" varies according to the gender of the speaker. Male speakers pronounce the phoneme [r], while female speakers pronounce it [R].

## B. Morphosyntactic

The mesolect has a few special features. Naffati & Queffélec (2004) summarize them as follows:

- Absence of the article and clitic personal pronouns (en / y) :

**Example 1:** *Tiens, pour les goals, ils en ont eu un très bon dans les années 40.* [Here, for the goals, they had a very good one in the 40s].

**Example 2:** *Lorsqu'il y a la queue.* [When there is a queue].

- Omission of the copula [*être*] [*to be*], which appears even in speakers with a fairly high level of learning and which manifests itself in a variety of situations:

**Example 1:** *Les soldats sont saisis de peur* [The soldiers are seized with fear] (in the presence of a past participle).

**Example 2:** *Elle est brune, ses yeux sont noirs, ses cheveux sont lisses.* [She is brown, her eyes are black, and her hair is straight] (in the presence of a qualifying adjective).

**Example 3:** *Le père est pour le départ de son fils, mais la mère est contre ce départ.* [The father is in favor of his son's departure, but the mother is against it] (presence of a prepositional phrase).

- Recurrent use of indicative tenses, in particular, the present, the compound past, and the simple future.

**Example:** *Où n'irait-on pas si pour tout arbitrage y compris hors du football, il faut faire appel à des étrangers [...] ils pourront être des excellents maîtres expérimentés si on s'occupe d'eux et on les recycle.* [Where would we go if we had to call on foreigners for all refereeing, even outside soccer [...] they could be excellent, experienced masters if we took care of them and retrained them].

- Attachment to the simple sentence and parataxis, which allow us to escape certain problems posed by the French verbal system.
- Hesitation over the choice of prepositions.

## C. Lexical

Mesolectal French is distinguished from Hexagonal French by its contribution to Tunisism, thus constituting an endogenous standard.

### 3.3. Acrolectal French

This linguistic variety is characteristic of a social elite with a high level of education, who prefer to use standard French as a linguistic reference: *"It is used in writing in official, professional or technical documents, but also in the press for 'noble' columns (international news, economic and financial columns."* (Naffati & Queffélec, 2004:80).

### 3.4. Codic alternation

Codic alternation is the most widespread phenomenon in spoken French between Tunisians. Numerous studies have examined the frequent use of alternation between French and Arabic in local oral discourse in Tunisia.

Drawing on the thesis of Laroussi (1991), Naffati & Queffélec identifies three types of code-switching:

### 3.4.1. Lexical alternation

It represents the most widespread form of codic alternation, according to the analysis of Laroussi, who describes it as involving *"linguistic contact that only concerns a lexical item or a substantial phrase"* (Naffati & Queffélec, 2004:81).

Lexical alternation is mainly characterized by the incorporation of French nouns into Arabic utterances, particularly specialized terms. This type of alternation occurs not only out of lexical necessity in the mother tongue, but its use can also be explained by discursive reasons or by *"a desire on the part of the bilingual Tunisian to manifest his or her belonging to a defined socio-cultural group"* (Naffati & Queffélec, 2004:81).

### 3.4.2. Emblematic alternation

This linguistic alternation reflects *"more a desire to speak bilingually and to maintain the symbolic presence of both languages in discourse than any strictly linguistic constraints"* (Naffati & Queffélec, 2004:81). It concerns idiomatic expressions and phatic expressions such as "d'accord" [agreed], "bon" [good], "bien sûr" [of course] and so on. The use of interjections and phatic elements in this context gives the discourse a distinctly local touch.

### 3.4.3. Repetitive alternation

Also known as sequential alternation, it occurs *"when a term is available in both languages, speakers tend to repeat it, often using the same language as the last speaker [...] Conversely, the same term may be used in a translated form. The reasons for this alternation are not always clear, even if it is a question of reinforcing the message, or of a strategy (...) reconciling the constraints and adapting to the various requirements of a bilingual society"* (Naffati & Queffélec, 2004:82).

### 3.4.4. Factors favoring the appearance of alternation

More often than not, the reasons for alternating codes are social and discursive. As a result, the alternation between Tunisian dialectal Arabic and French fulfils various discursive functions: quotations, designation of interlocutors, use of interjections or phatic elements, repetitions, modalization of a message, and personalization in relation to objectification.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, linguistic diversity in the Maghreb is a complex phenomenon shaped by the interaction of several languages and characterized by bilingualism, diglossia, and codic alternation. The different varieties of French in the region reflect this diversity, influenced by Arabic and Berber languages. From Algeria to Morocco and Tunisia, each country presents nuances in the use and evolution of French, reflecting specific socio-political and educational contexts. Despite attempts to maintain acrolectal French as the norm, there is a growing trend towards the use of more vernacular varieties that are better adapted to everyday communication contexts. Codic alternation, in particular, is emerging as a complex discourse strategy, integrating social, discursive, and identity-related motivations. In short, the study of French varieties in the Maghreb highlights the complex dynamics of linguistics and identity in this region of the world.

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