

Language Endangerment and the challenges for the future of Amazigh language in Morocco

Introduction

The question of languages is rich, complex and involves several parameters. As old as life on earth is, and limiting ourselves only to the axioms linked to human society, the problem of languages is fundamentally anthropological. Linguistic, grammatical and lexicological approaches are of course, important; but they do not, however, sufficiently reflect the other much deeper civilizational, cultural, historical, sociological, political and economic dimensions of languages.

The question of languages is to the matrix of societies what sociability is to social organization. It is politics in the broadest sense. Language is the expression of links, relationships, principles, values but also power relations and confrontations between and within societies.

Languages are fundamental aspects of cultural diversity. They are associated with unique worldviews, histories, and ways of life. Each language offers a unique perspective on the world and contributes to our understanding of human history. When a language vanishes, part of human culture and heritage disappears with it.

Languages are born, evolve, communicate with each other; they also die; we kill them or we push them to die slowly! Languages are in danger through their abandonment, their suffocation. The dominant social and cultural norms determine the respective places and roles of languages.

A socio-political act par excellence, the question of endangered languages affects, transforms and concerns the foundations of societies. Language, any language, is the mirror of the culture of the environment where it lives and where it spreads. A language is plural by its contents, its borrowings and loans from other languages, its symbols, its pronunciation and its ramifications. Behind the words, sentences, intonations and usages, there is the soul of a community. The technical part is far from reflecting the spirit of a language. A language conveys the essence of an environment. Beyond semiology, the substance of the social being of language emerges. The famous rhetoric about the hierarchy of languages and their pyramid obscures what is most relevant in this vast and complex equation.

It is through choices, decisions and political acts that languages are socially structured into: vehicular language, vernacular language, dialect, official,

national, local, regional or global language. Every language is at its origin an idiom of communication between social individuals. It is the political relationships and the economic, commercial and military vectors that make them what they are.

All languages are potentially alive and capable of any use when the conditions for their development are met. The purity of any language is an ideological falsification. Languages are built, mutated and structured by mutual borrowing, contact, supremacy and submission. Languages, like civilizations, die from their purity.

A minoritized, marginalized or despised community ends up adopting the dominant language which is the political, economic and territorial support of the political [authorities](#) which holds power; the State in this case.

By safeguarding a language and allowing it to have [a](#) social, cultural and political status, which emancipates, consolidates and disseminates it, we allow immense reserves of knowledge, and intelligence to live and develop, [enrich](#) societies and the world.

A language, any language, is a window into multiple, complex, discreet and perennial sections of life and the world. [When a](#) language is [endangered](#), it is the entire heritage of all humanity that is threatened. Of course, languages are caught up in the political function in its territorial extensions, aggressions, colonisations, usurpations, supremacies and other basic human needs, to dominate. The market and its changes, including economic, financial and technological globalization, have radically changed the terms of the debate and the dynamics of languages.

In addition to the standardization, simplism and techno-substance of hegemonic cultures, a commercial hierarchy determines the issues of languages and modes of communication. ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies), social networks and increasingly Artificial Intelligence, (which are by the way relevant), destructure languages, their cultural and anthropological foundations. They function to increase speed, reduce time and produce other determinants in which the majority of languages are increasingly excluded, impoverished to ultimately become simple keys to access digital signs and codes.

State of Amazigh Language in Morocco

The issue of [language endangerment](#) requires [a good](#) understanding of the [linguistic situation](#) in Morocco. For centuries, Amazigh, in all its components,

has been completely marginalised. *It was viewed as a collection of dialects grouped in three major language areas; it has been excluded and non-recognized by the State as a threat to national unity; stigmatised by politicians, especially the nationalists and pan-arabists; and discredited and not valued in society.*

In the name of the unification of the country in one nation with a single language, Arabic was considered the sole legitimate language of Moroccan culture. The literary Arabic language, perceived and supported by two reductive ideologies, served as a reason and an alibi for levelling out and spreading the low status of the Amazigh language and its cultural heritage.

The promotion of Arabic as a sacred language has reduced Amazigh to the status of a vulgar, profane language spoken by backward, ignorant people. For this pan-Islamism, anything that is not derived from the Arabic of the Koran is a lèse-majesté offence that undermines the religious version of the "Ummah".

In the name of the unity of the Arab nation, the ideologues of pan-Arabism have fought against any form of emergence of the Amazigh language, presented as a threat to Arab-Muslim identity, taxed with a colonialist whiff and a threat to the unity of the Baathist version of the "Ummah".

Darija, the language spoken by all Moroccans, the first language along with Amazigh, is also being fought in the name of the same arguments.

The two languages are relegated to the category of dialects, in the depths of social status. Yet Darija is the "Lingua Franca" of Morocco and the most widely spoken language and the channel of communication between all Moroccans. Darija shares with classical Arabic a large part of its lexicon, its new borrowings and its concepts, and with Amazigh its morphology, syntax and the majority of its mythological references, linguistic idiomatic expressions and proverbs, as well as its animist and supernatural overtones.

Amazigh Language Endangerment

Social evolution and change have gradually accentuated the erosion of the Amazigh language and culture. One of the decisive reasons why the Amazigh language has managed to retain its resilience, presence, vitality and roots is that it is embedded in highly structured communities, deep in the mountains, valleys and semi-arid and desert areas of the country. As the refuge of a rich, refined and varied culture, the Amazigh language has, over time, consolidated

and created a strong, homogeneous global identity structured around communities, tribes, federations and confederations.

With the development of the country, rural exodus, urbanisation, emigration, social mobility and above all the massive schooling of young people, as well as the spread of radio and television throughout the country, the Amazigh language has suffered a real decline. Over and above the official figures for the speakers of the language (which are clearly methodologically biased,) the Amazigh population has declined considerably.

Until the end of the twentieth century, it was destined to crumble and dissolve.

The widespread talk of the non-existence of a common language also endangered Amazigh. The belief that there are several different dialects and no homogenous vernacular language has largely harmed the language and sown doubts even among some Amazigh speakers. The truncated message that the Rifain (of the Zénètes), tachelhit (of the Masmoudas) and Tamazight of the Atlas (of the Sanhaja) have nothing in common, has largely handicapped the development of Amazigh.

An Official shift in Status

A real revolution has taken place in this area over the last two decades.

The process that has enabled the Amazigh language to make considerable progress has made it possible to make up for centuries of marginalisation and to repair the damage caused by all the policies that obscured it, particularly during the four decades after independence.

Nnayer, (the Amazigh year calendar), recently recognized officially as a public holiday in Morocco, is a moment in the national symbolism of the Amazigh culture that has always been celebrated in families. It is part of the logic of rural cycles. It is a strong marker of the celebration of the cycles of the seasons, of the benefits of the rains and of community life in the winter season after ploughing, after the harvesting and crushing of olives, just before the preparation of the tree plantations at the end of winter and the transhumance of the herds to the pastures of the summer in Adrar (the mountains).

An endangered language just two decades ago, Amazigh is now being reborn and facing up to its challenges. Described by the July 2011 Constitution as the common heritage of all Moroccans, it went from being a dialect to be

safeguarded on the radio in 1993 to an official language alongside [Modern Standard Arabic](#) in 2011.

On 3 May 2023, a communiqué from the Royal Cabinet announced the Royal decision to make Amazigh New Year's Day official bank holidays, celebrated in the same way the first Muharram in the Hegira and 31 December in the Gregorian calendar.

This political process is interesting in several respects: The Speech from the Throne in July 2001, followed by the Royal Speech in Ajdir (on the heights of Khénifra) on 17 October 2001, generated and nurtured an unprecedented virtuous dynamic, culminating in the recognition of the Amazigh year.

Recognising this landmark day as a bank holiday is a major political act. It is a milestone in this voluntary, protective, calm and ongoing process. The government has set 14 July each year as the bank holidays.

The IRCAM (Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture) was created on 17 October [2001](#) following the Ajdir speech. The Tifinagh character became the official script for the Amazigh language on 10 February 2003. Amazigh was introduced into primary education at the start of the school year in 2003 under an agreement between the Ministry of Education and IRCAM.

Tifinagh was not invented from scratch. Originating in Libya, this codification is a heritage shared by Amazigh-speaking communities scattered across several territories, from the Atlantic [Ocean](#) to the Canary Islands, from the Oasis of Siwa and Qara in Egypt, via Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, and from the Mediterranean to Mali and Niger, via Morocco and Mauritania.

It has served as an identity and a refuge for a plural language and culture that has been fought against, marginalised and scorned for centuries. The Tamazight television channel (La 8) was created on 10 January 2010, reinforcing this integration and inclusion in the everyday lives of Moroccans.

The Constitution has definitively framed, consolidated and put an end to more than two centuries of controversy over the nature of Amazigh. Amazigh is an official language of the State. It is the common heritage of all Moroccans and remains an essential component of the culture of all [Morocans](#).

Article 5 of the Constitution sets out the procedures, prerequisites and objectives for its integration into education, the media and public life. It defines the framework for the mode of governance of the institutions and structures responsible for it.

Article 5 of the Constitution is explicit, clear and politically well placed on the geostrategy of languages in Morocco: Arabic is [demeure] the official language of the State. The State works for the protection and for the development of the Arabic language, as well as the promotion of its use.

Likewise, Tamazight [Berber/Amazigh] constitutes an official language of the State, being common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception. An organic law defines the process of implementation of the official character of this language, as well as the modalities of its integration into teaching and into the priority domains of public life, so that it may be permitted in time to fulfill its function as an official language.

The State works for the preservation of Hassan^{ia}, as an integral component of the Moroccan cultural unity, as well as the protection of ^{its} speakers and of the practical cultural expression of Morocco. Likewise, it sees to the coherence of linguistic policy and national culture and to the learning and mastery of the foreign languages of greatest use in the world, as tools of communication, of integration and of interaction [by which] society [may] know, and be open to different cultures and to contemporary civilizations.

A National Council of Languages and of Moroccan Culture [Conseil national des langues et de la culture marocaine] is created, charged with [,] notably [,] the protection and the development of the Arabic and Amazigh languages and of the diverse Moroccan cultural expressions, which constitute an authentic patrimony and a source of contemporary inspiration. It brings together the institutions concerned in these domains. An organic law determines its attributions, composition and the modalities of [its] functioning. »

The framework law on the promotion of the Amazigh language and its integration into education and life ^{was} promulgated in 2019, thereby strengthening the inclusion of the language and culture in society.

The "national council for Moroccan languages and culture" created by the same article is covered by an organic law to be enacted in 2019, the draft of which was prepared in 2014 and 2015 by a national commission.

For the past two years, the government has been working hard to implement the institutional, financial and technical instruments that will accompany the officialisation of the Amazigh language.

Since its creation, IRCAM has done remarkable work on the Amazigh language, using the three regional language varieties as ^{a basis so as to structure, codify, integrate and revitalise the language and draw from the different language varieties a common language}. It is not an external,

exogenous language that is being imposed: it is the scientific, linguistic and semiological convergence of all the components of the regional varieties, which constitutes a coherent and logical inclusion.

The language planning strategy is based on a common grammatical framework and basic lexicon. The aim has been to proceed gradually, flexibly and progressively towards a standardisation that starts from regional realities without impoverishing them.

Homogenisation through convergence and international 'benchmarking' is the credo adopted by the IRCAM researchers, who come from different regions of the country, have multidisciplinary backgrounds and are trained to the highest academic standards.

Transcriptions in Tifinagh are [thriving](#) in public spaces. In May 2023, the Ministry of Education decided to introduce the teaching of the Amazigh language in all primary schools by 2030, with a target of 50% by 2026.

Members of parliament ask questions in Amazigh, and debates in plenary sessions have been translated into Amazigh since 2022. Training institutions for senior government officials are introducing Amazigh language teaching into their curricula.

Bachelors, Master's and Doctorate degrees are awarded by universities that have been developing specialised courses for two decades. Research units and study centres have been set up in Amazigh in Tifinagh, and not just in Arabic, French, English or Spanish, as was the case thirty years ago. Courses are taught in Amazigh and not just about Amazigh.

Of course, all this work, supported by the institutional and political arsenal gradually put in place since 2001, is confronted with the challenge of the socio-economic language market, where competition is relentless.

This renaissance and development of the Amazigh language has created an environment and a context in which all Moroccans can re-appropriate their culture in all its variants and its heritage, linguistic, artistic, societal and political dimensions.

All the above institutional and political achievements are certainly important, but they cannot remedy the damage caused by the marginalisation of the language and culture in all its diversity and its many, dense, multi-faceted ramifications, nor the damage done to its intangible, societal and local dimensions. Whole swathes of the linguistic and cultural diversity of each

region, each village and each traditional community have been lost or distorted forever.

Conclusion

Despite all these achievements, the two official languages are totally dependent on the language markets and the players in the globalisation process, which is dominated by the languages of scientific, technological and digital globalisation.

The endangered languages spoken by indigenous communities are carriers of traditional ecological knowledge, medicinal practices, social practices, and sustainable ways of living. When a language vanishes, part of human culture and heritage disappears with it.

Endangered languages represent a unique part of the world cultural heritage. Their protection is not only a matter of linguistic diversity but cultural diversity as well. It is also vital to ensuring that future generations can benefit from the wealth of knowledge, traditions, and perspectives they offer.

Nowadays, endangered languages are facing various threats, including cultural assimilation, economic pressures, and the dominance of more widely spread languages. The protection and revitalisation of these languages are essential for the protection of not only linguistic diversity but also the cultural heritage they embody.

With the spread of digital technology and artificial intelligence, one may wonder about how many of these endangered languages will manage to resist and survive.

Indeed, after two decades of the establishment of IRCAM (October 2001), the introduction of Amazigh at school (2003), and after more than a decade of its introduction in the Media (2010) and its officialisation (July 2011), the Amazigh communities' attitudes haven't changed much. Under the impact of globalization social media and the spread of new technologies, Amazigh young generations still view Amazigh as useless and of no value and prefer to learn foreign languages, especially English, because of the educational and professional opportunities the language offers.

Will languages become the playthings of minority communities on the fringes of productive and arrogant technology?

Professor Driss KHROUZ.
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