Moroccan Arabic: New advances in researching its multilingual practices and digital spaces

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Introduction

The last fifteen years have brought many new developments to Arabic philology – first of all, we finally have access to large databases of linguistic data, consisting of the press, materials provided by video-hosting sites, as well as posts on social networks, both in Standard and dialectal varieties of Arabic. The possibility of working with such materials has sparked interest in linguistic theories of a more general character, and those based on other languages and cultures. Thus, specialists in Arabic language and, in our case, Moroccan Arabic, have had the unprecedented opportunity to go from descriptive linguistics to more universal trends and to see whether it would be possible to fit their Arabic-language based conclusions and observations into the big picture.

The Maghreb countries in general, and Morocco in particular, have traditionally been a point of attraction for Arabists, specialising in sociolinguistics. This is first and foremost due to its multilingualism: Morocco alone is home to a range of varieties of Moroccan Arabic, Standard Arabic, as well as three varieties of Amazigh (Tarifit, Tashelhit, and Tamazight). In addition, French and Spanish are also traditionally widely used, and,

recently, English has started to gain popularity. While not so long ago sociolinguists working with Morocco were to conduct fieldwork, as well as design surveys and questionnaires, today they are increasingly turning to the study of sociolinguistic trends using digital/online material.

Therefore, it is not surprising that last year, in 2024, we dedicated the 8th edition of the International Conference on Moroccan Arabic to the digitalisation of Morocco and to new trends in the study of the country's linguistic situation. This conference took place at the Institute for Culture and Society (the University of Navarra) under the title *Moroccan Arabic: New generations and new practices in the digital era*, and this special issue is the fruit of that conference. The special issue focuses on advances, approaches, and emerging trends in the study of Moroccan Arabic, its writing, standardisation, and use in the digital era and its spaces. This special issue therefore seeks to address the following questions: 1. What new approaches could we use to better situate Moroccan Arabic in its historical and contemporary contexts?; 2. How is the use and status of Moroccan Arabic changing in both traditional and digital environments, and what ideologies are involved?; 3. In the digital environment, what would be the interplay of different communicative needs and linguistic affordances?; 4. How does the digital environment transform linguistic and discursive practices?; and, finally, 5. What ethnolinguistic, political, and social subjectivities emerge in the new digital communication in Moroccan Arabic?

To tackle these questions, the articles included in this special issue use a wide array of approaches and combine theories and methodologies from applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, linguistic engineering, and computer-mediated communication.

The issue opens with an article by Sarali Gintsburg and Mike Baynham, titled "A thousand years of translanguaging in the multilingual Maghreb". In their study, the authors use the theory of translanguaging to build a bridge between the linguistic situation in the Muslim Andalusia and in the contemporary Maghreb. The authors argue that the peripheral character of the Maghreb dialects, as well as their linguistic permeability, allows these dialects to easily accommodate different varieties of linguistic switching. This allows the authors to draw a parallel to switching in Andalusian Arabic, which was characteristic of poetry and, in some respects, daily communication in al-Andalus. To this end, parallels are drawn between the Andalusian *kharjas* and *zajals* on the one hand and data readily available online – an episode from the comic show *al-Kamira lakum* by the Moroccan actress Hanane el--Fadhili and the song "Partir loin" by the Algerian singer Reda Talyani on the other.

The next article in this special issue is "A Darija and the global multilingual digital landscape" by Mena Lafkioui. In her study, the author offers readers a general sociolinguistic analysis of the Moroccan linguistic digital landscape and comes to the conclusion that Moroccan Arabic is strengthening its position and the author even applies a new term for her observation – *darijation*. We can compare this with the rather well-studied phenomenon of secondary orality coined by Walter Ong, with the interesting nuance that in the case of Morocco, while Moroccan Arabic (that is, traditionally perceived as oral variety) is playing an increasingly important role in written communication, the positions of its rivals in the digital field, primarily French and literary Arabic, are weakening.

The third article in the collection is produced by a group of three authors – Anass Sedrati, Reda Benkhadra, and Mounir Afifi – and represents a kind of technical report

compiled by the authors who were behind the birth and development of the Wikipedia in Moroccan Arabic. In this report, titled "Standardising Darija: Collaborative approaches in the Moroccan Darija Wikipedia", the authors share their experiences and also draw attention to the technical difficulties they inevitably have to face. This report will undoubtedly be of interest to linguists and experts in Moroccan Arabic: in addition to presenting a history of Moroccan Arabic Wikipedia, it outlines a platform-specific proposed orthographic standard for Moroccan Arabic and compares it to actual user practice. Viewed as such, it provides a clear and thorough – indeed, rather lengthy – account.

The next paper in the issue, "Digital age and polycentricity in Moroccan Arabic: Complexity and heterogeneity in linguistic practices" by Adil Moustaoui addresses the topic of polycentricity in the context of Moroccan Arabic. The author explores how digitalization of the Moroccan society is central to conceptualizing the concept of polycentricity coined by the late Jan Bloemmart (2005). The analysis provided by the author is based on a language corpus taken from various social media and digital platforms that includes influencer profiles as a highly revealing manifestation of polycentricity in Moroccan Arabic. Moustaoui concludes that Moroccan Arabic is not only essentially polycentric but that its polycentricity is highly complex and therefore there exist no guidelines that would determine standards or norms of its use.

Rosa Pennisi's article entitled "(Moroccan) mixed Arabic in digital media: A comparative analysis of oral and written practices in Moroccan digital platforms and newspaper" continues the conversation about the practices of using Moroccan Arabic online. To run her comparative analysis of oral and written styles, the author uses several online resources – a newspaper, episodes from a talkshow and a podcast. Similar to Lafkioui, Pennisi concludes that Moroccan Arabic is starting to play a more prominent role in online spaces (in this case, in formal media communication).

In her turn, Samera Abdelati offers a rather fresh perspective on the practices and norms of Moroccan Arabic – she chose advertising products as her research material. In her paper entitled "Moroccan Arabic in advertising context: An analysis of oral and written messages", Abdelati explores the extent to which different languages and registers in Morocco are used in contemporary advertising, providing compelling examples of their application. Additionally, the author offers a valuable historical overview of the role these linguistic varieties have played in advertising over time. The study also highlights key strategies employed by advertisers to target specific audiences, as well as the linguistic factors that justify the writing conventions they adopt.

Our special issue concludes with another technical report entitled "*Sawton*e: A universal framework for phonetic similarity and alignment across languages and scripts", in which the developer of *Sawtone*, Omar Kamali, shares his experience in creating integrated framework designed to enable consistent cross-script phonetic alignment and text normalisation aimed at addressing the inherent challenges in processing text across diverse writing systems. Kamali's report contains not only step-by-step description but also a case study on preprocessing Moroccan Arabic data for Large Language Model (LLM) training. The author concludes by emphasising the importance of such frameworks in the context of rapidly growing digital communication.