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ENGLISH IN MOROCCO: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW¹

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ABSTRACT

English has undeniably become the lingua franca of the world. Indeed, it has become, so to speak, the predominant language of globalization. Likewise, English has managed to infiltrate into the Moroccan linguistic market. The present paper provides a historical overview of the spread of English in Morocco. More specifically, it traces back the three major historical stages that English has gone through in the Moroccan territory, namely: the pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial. To meet this end, the paper seeks to answer the following questions: (i) what are the historical stages of the English spread in Morocco? (ii) When and how English was introduced to the Moroccan linguistic market? (iii) What are the motivations that lie behind the spread of English in Morocco?

1. THE PRE-COLONIAL STAGE:

In the pre-colonial era, Morocco's linguistic situation was characterized by simplicity if it is to be compared with nowadays situation; Moroccans used to speak either Arabic or Amazigh and no foreign languages have been introduced yet. Equally importantly, Moroccan Arabic was still close to Standard Arabic since French, at that time, has not infiltrated yet into the Moroccan society². Furthermore, Arabic and Amazigh used to live in peace with no political or ethnical status for each. The Arabic language was the predominant language given

¹ This paper is part of an assignment in sociolinguistics, its objectives being to provide a sociolinguistic profile of the status of the English language in Morocco. In this respect, we should like to thank professor Albakry for his motivation and seriousness. As the disclaimer goes, any error of facts, interpretations is purely ours.

² For more details see Ennaji (1988).

its religious and cultural status, whereas Amazigh was widely used as a medium of communication among the non-Arab speakers, particularly in rural areas. Accordingly, during this period of time, foreign languages, such as English, were almost absent from the Moroccan linguistic context except for some historical events that marked the first indirect links with English. These links were restricted to some diplomatic or trade relations either with the U.K or the U.S.A. According to some historians, the first diplomatic contact with the Anglophone world dates back to the 13th century when King John of England sent a message to Sultan Mohamed Ennassir, asking for an alliance against France and support against his enemies within Britain. Due to the strategic geographical position of Morocco, Great Britain sought to deepen the political, economic and cultural relations with Morocco. This pushed The Sa'adi Sultan 'Abd al-Malik (1575-1578) to issue decrees in favor of English merchants to facilitate their commercial activities. Bearing witness to the political and diplomatic links between the two countries are some letters that were exchanged between Queen Elizabeth I and some of the Sa'adi Sultans. The first Moroccan Ambassador of London was sent by Mohamed Ech-Cheikh to King Charles I with a message of peace and friendship in 1637. For this reasons, some historians believe that until 1904 Morocco was part of the informal Empire of Great Britain (Bensghir, 2003). As far as the American-Moroccan relations are concerned, Morocco was the first country to acknowledge America's independence. In fact, the Sultan Sidi Muhammad Ben Abdullah announced his desire to establish diplomatic relations with the United States. Accordingly, he issued a declaration on December 20, 1777, announcing that all vessels sailing under the American flag could freely enter Moroccan ports.

2. THE COLONIAL STAGE:

Morocco was officially occupied by France on March 30th, 1912, the day Morocco signed the Treaty of Fez that declared it as a French protectorate (Kelsey and Menzer, 2007).

Over 44 years, Morocco was under the control of France economically, military as well as culturally. The French occupation has, in a sense, enriched the Moroccan linguistic market through introducing the French language. French has enjoyed a privileged status over the other foreign languages and gained significant ground on the native languages spoken in Morocco. Hence, this era was marked by the spread of French at the expense of the other (local) languages. However, as far as English is concerned, the same era has known Morocco's first major contact with English. Before, the presence of English in Morocco was limited to some diplomatic and economic relations with countries such as Britain and U.S.A. Apart from this, English has not had much native speakers or learners in Morocco.

2.1. TANGIER AS AN INTERNATIONAL ZONE:

The first major historical stage where English was somehow spoken in Morocco is that during the international status of Tangier. Tangier was made an international zone by law in 1923; it was under the joint administration of France, Spain and Great Britain. Thus, Tangier became a destination for many British and American diplomats, spies, writers and businessmen. Consequently, English was the language of communication between the different nationalities settled in Tangier.

2.2. THE AMERICAN LANDINGS:

The second major event was during the Second World War, when thousands of American soldiers landed in Morocco and established some military bases in Casablanca, Kenitra and Tangier. This event is considered to be the most important historical link between Moroccans and English (Ennaji, 2005); it dates back to 1942 when U.S.A has decided to conduct military landings on Morocco to prepare for a future attack on Southern Europe. These landings were a part of the Operation Torch intended to put an end to the Nazis (militaryhistory.about.com). Accordingly, it has become familiar to hear English in the major

cities of Morocco as the American soldiers stayed there. There was a huge interaction between Moroccans and American soldiers to the extent that some Moroccans have managed to learn some English for communicative purposes.

3. THE POST-COLONIAL STAGE:

There is no blinking the fact that English language constitutes an integral component of worldwide languages. Similarly, the Moroccan linguistic market is by no means immune to this ostensible linguistic, sociocultural, political and pedagogical invasion. A number of studies have been devoted to study the spread of English in Morocco. Consequences and implications have been investigated (Ennaji, 1991, 2003, 2005; Sadiqi, 1991, 2003, among many others). Recent decades have witnessed substantial inquiries about the status of English in Morocco alongside people's attitudes towards it (Errihani, 2008; El Kirat *et al.*, 2010, and references cited therein).

Interestingly in this regard, Hyde (1994: 295) maintains that 'in Morocco it has been felt to learn another 'imposed' language: English'. Succinctly stated, given to the remarkable widespread of English as an international language or, more precisely, as a *lingua franca*, Morocco, like many other countries, has, by force or choice, to accommodate this linguistic, sociocultural and ideological movement. He along the same lines argues that:

Language nowadays deals in image, and can be marketed and sold like any other product or service : 'speaking English is the key to employment', 'speaking English joins you to the international community', 'speaking English makes for modernity', and so forth (1994: 296)

Evidently, globalization has boosted the need for English language proficiency amongst people, particularly those willing to excel in the field of IT (Information Technology) and business affairs. In other terms, with the advent of technology, it has become a prerequisite to master English so as to adapt to the high demands of contemporary life. This may be attributable to the present state of English; the language of paramount importance in several domains, namely politics, economy, media, and diplomatic affairs. In a similar vein, Sadiqi (1991: 106, quoted in Ennaji, 2005: 120) states that:

Policy makers in Morocco have certainly realized that international communication between Morocco and the rest of the world could not be achieved by French alone; they know that English is the key to communication in a very tangible sense.

Beyond a shadow of doubt, Morocco has witnessed rampant spread of foreign languages in the last few years; this was mainly due to historical incidents of subsequent eras of colonialism that resulted in proliferation of languages, and the creation of a number of institutes. Therefore, to better fathom the rise of the English language in Morocco, it is admonished to localize the different cultural and language exchange institutes in addition to universities that were established in Morocco. Of these, one may particularly mention Al-Akawayn University in Fes, the first Anglophone College in Morocco that has all its modules and subject taught in English (Ennaji, 2005).

Incontrovertibly, Morocco over the past has put the welcome mat out, displaying a great stance towards embracing non-native languages. Just few years before the country declared independence in 1956, AMIDEAST -- knew its inception in 1950 in Rabat. The latter still binds the two countries together, Morocco and America. Likewise, the staff of AMIDEAST moved to the vibrant city, Casablanca, to set up a new office to expand its

program. During its foundation, AMIEDEAST focused on promoting studies of Moroccan and American students, as it offered real opportunities for local students, particularly those fascinated by the English language, and those who showed interest in the cultural Exchange programs by granting its applicants and students the Fulbright scholarship to the United States of America. Interestingly, a browse through the official website revealed --after tracking the foundation of AMIDEAST in most Arab countries, namely Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, etc. -- Morocco was roughly ranked amongst the oldest countries where AMIDEAST knew its installation.

Furthermore, English language in Morocco was exempted from any colonial connotations. Albeit discreet, its presence in the linguistic landscape is still dynamic. Thus, Moroccans, it appears, have a positive attitude towards the language (El Kirat *et al.* 2010) and it seems to be a serious rival of French in higher education (Ennaji, 1991: 21). Departments of English in Morocco provide an interesting illustration to the fact that English has progressively started gaining ground and value. To date, there are approximately 16 departments of English.

The language also seems to be used in a number of domains such as call centers, scientific writings along with a relatively scanty number of newspaper and magazines published in English. Unquestionably, English is taught in high schools and there a number of famous English private centers, of which British and American centers are only ones. All these, among other things, help contribute to the spread of English in Morocco (Ennaji, 2005). This being said, however, English is absent from television, American movies being dubbed in French (Ennaji, 2005). Nevertheless, one should not blind the fact that English movies are introduced via satellite channels, namely MBC2, Panorama Action, to mention but a few.

4. CONCLUSION

The locus of interest of this paper has been to present a historical overview of the spread of English in Morocco. It has been pointed out that English has been integrated into the Moroccan linguistic landscape. Being an international language as well as a language with no colonial connotations, English enjoys a prestigious status. This state of affairs is clearly motivated by its being a language taught in both high schools and universities as well as it is used in a number of formal and informal spheres.

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