Women and Linguistic Space*

Fatima Sadiqi

Introduction

This chapter considers language and gender in present-day Morocco. It highlights the fact that women in this country are ethnically, socio-economically, and educationally differentiated, and that this differentiation is reflected in their everyday language use. The prevalent Western view of Moroccan, and Arab-Muslim women in general misses such distinctions and resulting disparities between women.¹

The argument made in this chapter is that Moroccan women use the rich linguistic resources that are available to them to either perpetuate or subvert the conventional gender roles assigned to them within Moroccan culture. Illiterate (presumably monolingual) women use oral genres to achieve personal and social ‘gains’ in their daily use of language, and educated (presumably multilingual) women ‘switch’ from one language to another for the same purpose. Thus, regardless of their socio-economic status and educational level, Moroccan women are never linguistically passive; they negotiate power in a linguistically complex environment. Therefore, this chapter concerns Moroccan women’s agency as demonstrated through language.

Moroccan women’s linguistic agency is part and parcel of women’s struggle for self-assertion. The nature of women’s linguistic agency depends upon their socio-economic status and educational level. In all cases, women’s linguistic agency is presented as creative and
powerful; it is constituted of strategies of communication that women use to maximize their chances in achieving gains in real life contexts.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first section is a general presentation of the linguistic situation in postcolonial Morocco. The second section deals with the ways in which languages in Morocco interact with gender in everyday contexts. The third section focuses on monolingual (illiterate) women’s linguistic strategies of communication, and the fourth section concerns the communicative modes of multilingual (literate) women.

The Linguistic Situation in Morocco

Language has always been affected by history and culture. It is a strong component of one’s historical and cultural identity, as well as the deepest layers of the personality.²

A particularly important phase in Morocco’s modern history was the era of French colonization (1912-1956). Language played a role in this era, as well as in post-colonial Morocco.³ The powerful, written languages were utilized by both the colonized and the rulers of the newly independent Morocco. The former did so to maintain control over the colonized and the latter to strengthen state-building. As for the oral and less prestigious languages, they have, up to the present time, largely been relegated to home and hearth.

The French colonizers characterized their invasion of Morocco as a ‘civilizing mission’ (mission civilisatrice). French was established as the ‘superior’ language while Moroccan languages were considered to be ‘inferior’ and ‘debased’. These preferences were part of the broader ideology of colonialism whereby the military supremacy of the French and their self-adopted role as ‘enlighteners’ and ‘decision-makers’ led to a construction and reading of the Moroccans as the ‘inferior’ and ‘backward’ other. This reading also established Western style ‘modernity’ as the sole remedy for Morocco’s ‘backwardness’. In the name of ‘civilizing’ the
Moroccans and in the name of ‘respecting’ the indigenous culture, the French elevated their own language and marginalized the Moroccan languages (and the women who use them).

The colonizers were aware of the deep cultural differences of Moroccans, and used different discursive terms for them. In general, Moroccans’ class, gender, and location greatly influenced the way that the colonizer and colonized interacted.

After Morocco’s independence in 1956, the newly autonomous citizens sought to construct their own ‘authenticity’ in the face of a disillusioning ‘modernity’ that excludes them as real agents. The postcolonial era has witnessed the dilemma caused by this deep disillusionment. In this overall transition, women benefited far less than men. In fact, although women participated in the struggle for independence and although both boys and girls have had access to education in urban areas right after independence, women did not accede to political power and their rate of illiteracy continued to be much higher than that of men. Women realized bitterly that the struggle for independence promoted the culture of the elite, strengthened Arabic as the language of the nation and Islam as state religion and relegated women and the mother tongues they spoke to the private sphere.

The postcolonial linguistic situation in Morocco is thus complex. It has resulted in establishing multilingualism as an important component of Moroccan culture. 4 Multilingualism interacts significantly with ethnicity, gender, class and educational opportunities. Four major languages are used in Morocco: Standard Arabic, French, Berber, and Moroccan Arabic. Whereas the first two languages have written forms, are taught at school, and are perceived as ‘literate’, the latter two do not have written forms, are not taught at school, and are perceived as ‘oral’ and ‘illiterate’. In spite of genuine efforts to teach Berber, the language is still excluded from school and from print. Being largely illiterate, Moroccan women are more closely associated with the oral languages, especially Berber.
The geographical position of Morocco at the crossroads between Africa and Europe, its deep historical roots in Africa, its proximity to the Western world (only 14 kilometers separate it from the Gibraltar Strait), as well as its Mediterranean heritage, are factors that explain Morocco’s openness and appreciation of other nations and languages. Unlike the situation in some other Middle Eastern countries where multilingualism is often considered a ‘threat’ to Arab identity and unity, multilingualism is perceived in the Moroccan culture as a positive social-promotor -- it increases the individual’s potential for communication and opens up horizons so far as jobs and social ascension are concerned. Multilingualism is furthermore a positive identity-builder for it boosts self-respect and creates a composite identity which makes individuals more socially confident and tolerant toward others. Most Moroccan intellectuals perceive multilingualism as an empowering factor, that creates intellectual authority and fosters intellectual exchange in a world which is rapidly heading towards globalization.

Multilingualism as a cultural component of Moroccan culture interacts significantly with other strong components of the culture. For example, the state religion, Islam is tightly related to Standard Arabic, the official language of Morocco, and is not closely related to Berber. Both Islam and Standard Arabic have been established as being ‘sacred’ in written history, itself a ‘venerated’ aspect of Moroccan culture. These facts are translated politically by their inclusion in the 1962 Constitution.

History, Islam and Standard Arabic have been gradually constructed as typical ‘male’ domains in Moroccan culture. Being a literate type of ‘high’ knowledge, the written history of Morocco has been largely recorded by men and the voices of women in this history are still barely perceptible. As a result, the images of women in Moroccan history have up to recent times been exclusively presented from a male perspective. It is only after independence that women started to have access to education and to assert themselves in the public spaces.
Seemingly, although Moroccan women are overwhelmingly Muslim, they do not relate to religion in the same way as men. The fact that they have for centuries been excluded from the public sphere in which mosques are located distanced women from publicly practicing religion. Written history and Islam are closely related to Standard Arabic, a non-mother tongue that is learnt at school. These three elements of Moroccan culture were thus withheld from women, the majority of whom are still illiterate up to the present time.

The fact that multilingualism is power-laden means that it has significant social meanings and implications for gender dynamics in everyday interactions. The language and gender interaction in Morocco is also closely related to the social status of women, namely their geographical origin (urban vs rural), their class (rich vs poor), their age, and their level of education. For example, urban, middle and upper class women have more access to education than rural (usually poor) women.

Starting from the mid-1980s, growing demands for human rights crystallized into demands for women’s rights and cultural (language) rights. Feminist projects in Morocco have been initiated and led by both women and men. These feminist projects may be broadly categorized as being liberal or Islamist. Each of these two trends may be further sub-divided. Both trends defend Islam and denounce patriarchal customary practices. Further, ‘modernity’ is claimed by both liberals and Islamists. Islamists adopt modernity to gain credibility inside and outside their country, and secularists adopt Islam for the same reason, and to obtain an aura of authenticity. Both groups utilize European languages, especially French and English. Specific customs at home, and tastes in clothing, furniture, and cuisine also represent both trends. Islamists oppose sexual independence and freedom but they adopt other modern views. Even the veil has undergone changes in meanings from a political symbol to a fashion. Ideals are appropriated and constantly negotiated according to specific aims. The media and
unemployment make women in both trends polyvocal, multilingual, and complex, a fact which calls for constant historicization of the debates around women.

Within Moroccan feminist projects and as a reaction to marginalization and exclusion, women began to rewrite their history. Most of these writings express women’s bitterness in the postcolonial era. Women felt betrayed as they had not benefited from the struggle for independence despite their participation in it. This literature emerged from the peripheral, feminist, essentially oral-oriented testimonies that challenged the hegemonic narratives of linear historicism that has, up to now, legitimized the national elites and perpetuated gender and class discriminations. Women’s studies and gender studies programs have been established in Moroccan universities. There have been efforts to recover women’s voices of the past, create more awareness of women’s present needs, and to prepare new sources on women in North Africa, including oral and written texts by women. The study of gender and language is therefore relevant to women’s goals in the post-colonial period. In this as in other searches for women’s voices, one should bear in mind the complex factors set into motion by colonialism, modernity, the search for authenticity and the relationship between the East and the West.

The Interaction of Language and Gender in Morocco

In principle, Moroccans may use one, two, and sometimes three or more languages in their everyday life. Gender interferes greatly with language use: women do not often have the same choices as men. According to a study by the author, Berber is not only more used by women than men but it has always been associated with women. Berber may, thus, be termed a typically ‘female’ language, Standard Arabic is a typically ‘male’ language, Moroccan Arabic is both a female and male language although it is more used by men in rural areas, French is a typically urban language and is used more by women than men. This linguistic repartition has
its roots in the social functions of the four languages in Morocco and the way these functions interact with gender perception and gender negotiation in everyday life.

**Standard Arabic and gender**

Standard Arabic has a special social function in Moroccan society and culture. It has always been a language of power, as well as a ‘high’ and status-marked language of important social, religious, legal, and political rituals. Dominant groups in a society achieve power mainly through control of high languages. As Mary Kaplan rightly puts it “refusal of access to public language is one of the major forms of the oppression of women within a social class as well as in trans-class situations.”

The strongest cultural aspect of Standard Arabic is the fact that it is perceived as the ‘voice’ of Islam and the symbol of a glorious past. Since the arrival of Islam in Morocco around 700 AD, Standard Arabic has remained the language of Arab identity, Arab literature/poetry, as well as religious scholarship and practice. This language is the official language of the Moroccan state. Just after independence, Morocco joined the Arab League in which Standard Arabic is the lingua franca.

The gender aspect of Standard Arabic resides in the fact that being the medium of the ‘public’ expression of religion and politics, it is more accessible to, and significant for men, as they are more closely defined in connection with public spaces such as the mosque, the government, etc. whereas women are considered to inhabit, or rightfully occupy the private sphere, or the ‘home’. Moroccan men have always identified with the public domain and the latter have always defined the concept of maleness in Morocco.

As a result, although Moroccan women strongly feel that they ‘belong’ to the official religion of the country, they do not really participate in public religious practices. This is reflected in the fact that their linguistic space in Standard Arabic (through which religion is
expressed) is rather ‘limited’. For example, women in Morocco, and in the Arab-Muslim countries in general, do not publicly announce prayers, pray aloud, or pronounce religious formulae that accompany important religious rites. This explains the non-use of words like *imama* (female leader of prayers), *fqiha* (female religious consultant), *muftiya* (female religious legislator), *musaliya* (female leader of prayers), *muqri’ah* (female reader of the Qur’an), and *mujewwida* (female reciter of the Qur’an). While men attend the mosque and participate in the daily ritual of public prayers, women generally pray at home and seek ‘religious’ *baraka* (blessing) in the holy sanctuaries of deceased religious saints.

The majority of Moroccan women are illiterate. The illiteracy rate among these women in is 60% (48% in urban areas and 95.5% in rural areas). Being illiterate, the majority of Moroccan women are excluded from the spheres of public power as Standard Arabic is accessible only through schooling. Even when women are proficient in Standard Arabic, they tend to use it less frequently than men because of the discouraging and negative attitude of men in general toward women’s ‘fluency’ in Standard Arabic. Moroccan men’s attitude is more positive toward women’s proficiency in French.

As a consequence of Moroccan women’s ‘exclusion’ from the domains where Standard Arabic is publicly used, a general tendency to disqualify women as competent public speakers in the Moroccan society has developed. This state of affairs created an apparent paradox in Moroccan society: women are perceived as conservative in the sense that they preserve oral culture by speaking Berber and transmitting cultural values and ‘non-conservative’ because they do not use the conservative means of public linguistic expression: Standard Arabic. The paradox makes sense politically in that it highlights the political status of oral and written mediums of language. It is true that both Standard Arabic and Berber are socially defined as conservative, but they are so in very different ways: whereas Berber is perceived as ‘conservative’ because it expresses traditional oral literature and folklore, Standard Arabic is
perceived as ‘conservative’ because it perpetuates traditional written literature, history and poetry in addition to the fact that it is the language of the Qur’an, the holy book of all Muslims. Consequently, women relate more closely to Berber and less to Standard Arabic. However, in recent years, women (academics and politicians) have started to use Standard Arabic in order to reach wider audiences.

Berber and gender

Berber is the oldest language in Morocco and North Africa. Although this language has never been associated with a ‘divine’ written text, it has survived for over 5000 years. There are three major dialects of Berber in Morocco: Tashelhit (used in the south of Morocco), Tamazight (used in central Morocco), and Tarifit (used in the north of the country). Many factors have contributed to the maintenance of Berber in Morocco: the mother tongue status of the language, female illiteracy, male migration from rural to urban areas or European countries, and French. Being a native language, Berber possesses the historicity, dynamism and vitality of mother tongues. As a rural and exclusively oral language, Berber has not throughout history competed with the ‘literate’ Standard Arabic. It has mainly been maintained in rural and semi-urban areas and is still used primarily in homes and intimate gatherings. In the later context, it is generally perceived as a token of solidarity. Berber is also the language of communication between the (male) migrants to the cities or Europe and their families left behind. Paradoxically, the presence of French in Morocco helped to maintain Berber. Through the dissemination of education in the French language, language itself has gradually become less associated with its religious base in the minds of Moroccans, a fact which tacitly ‘legitimized’ the use of Berber in everyday life and improved attitude toward it.

The factors that have ensured the maintenance of Berber are linked to women in a significant way: women are the ones who have perpetuated the language as a mother tongue
and they are the ones who gave it its deep and emotional tie to the self. Women are also the ones who have suffered more from illiteracy and who have stayed home to take care of the children when the men migrate. The factors enhancing Berber associate the language with the private sphere and the language of ancestors, and explain the relatively inferior social status that Berber possesses, in comparison with the other Moroccan languages.

To the extent that Berber is the language of cultural identity, home, the family, village affiliation, intimacy, traditions, orality, and nostalgia to a remote past, it perpetuates attributes that are considered female in the Moroccan culture. The absence of Berber from the powerful key institutional areas reinforce these attributes. Indeed, the fate of Berber has always paralleled the fate of women in Morocco. For example, the recent demands for more official recognition of Berber have been accompanied by demands for more women’s civil rights. Demands for human rights go hand in hand with demands for cultural rights.

**Moroccan Arabic and gender**

Moroccan Arabic is the *lingua franca* in Morocco. The need for a *lingua franca* is motivated by the presence of three major Berber dialects and many sub-dialects. The speakers of the three Berber dialects have often recourse to Moroccan Arabic when communicating between themselves. Although Moroccan Arabic is used by both women and men, preferences for this languages sometimes vary on the basis of gender. For example, in rural areas, Berber women use Moroccan Arabic less than Berber men because they are more confined to their homes. However, outside home, Moroccan Arabic is used by Berbers and Arabs of both sexes except in remote areas where Berber is used by both sexes. In urban centers, educated women shift from Berber to Moroccan Arabic and from the latter to French more than men. The classical explanation for this phenomenon is that women aspire more to social prestige as they need it more than men.
As Moroccan Arabic is not restricted to strictly private contexts, it is less of a ‘female’ language than Berber. Being historically related to Standard Arabic, this language is generally perceived as a ‘more civilized’ language than Berber, but in lacking a written form, Moroccan Arabic is perceived as a ‘debased’ form of Standard Arabic.

_French and gender_

French is an urban superordinate second language which is closely linked to education. It has, over the years, become very useful in the private sector. French is also necessary for obtaining employment and is, thus, positively perceived as a symbol of ‘modernity’, ‘enlightenment’, and ‘openness to the Western world’. The general attitude to French is positive. Like Moroccan Arabic, French is used by both men and women, but it interacts significantly with gender: whereas men use French in the higher administrative and military positions, thus exploiting the ‘emasculating’ aspect that usually accompany colonial languages, women benefit from the social prestige aspect of this language. They derive social power from being considered ‘civilized’ and ‘modern’. Even in conservative families, a woman speaking French to her children is perceived positively.

In spite of the fact that the majority of Moroccan women do not have easy access to French, this language is more favored by women than by men. In fact, women tend to display proficiency in French more frequently than proficiency in Standard Arabic. This behavior is linked to the fact that men are generally more favorable to women’s proficiency in French than to their proficiency in Standard Arabic. The reason for this is that French is less related to cultural identity than Standard Arabic, and, thus, less threatening to the male status quo. Men are more favorable to women ‘speaking’ French than they are to women ‘behaving’ in a ‘French’ (Westernized) way because women’s use of French is a guarantee that they will speak it (and teach it) to their children. ‘Behaving’ in a French way is generally perceived as
‘stripping’ women of their ‘authenticity’ as members of their own community. It is also regarded as a sign of ‘too much emancipation’ that clashes with Moroccan cultural values. This makes sense in Moroccan patriarchal and sexist culture. Women are aware of this and use French to gain, use, and maintain social power.

Overall, French is more of a female language than Moroccan Arabic. When compared to Standard Arabic, French displays a different aspect: both languages have social power, but each power carries a specific symbolic meaning in the Moroccan context: French is crucial in Moroccan post-colonial administration and politics, and Standard Arabic is a symbol of a glorious past and cultural identity. The two symbolic powers serve men more than women; men appropriate the symbolic powers of French and Standard Arabic (they hold the highest positions in politics, administration and business) and women are more associated with the ‘modern’ (but ‘alien’) aspect of the two languages. Their use of French is socially perceived positively only in relation to fostering ‘good’ citizens.

The above overview reveals that languages interact with gender in Morocco. Women are closer to Berber and Moroccan Arabic than men because Moroccan society clings to its indigenous traditions, but assigns the responsibility to guard those traditions to women. On the other hand, the majority of women are distanced from literate languages because they are less subject to schooling. Of the two literate languages, educated women are closer to French.

**Moroccan women’s strategies of communication**

Moroccan women cope with a heavily patriarchal society. In spite of this disempowering environment, women are not passive; they ‘fight back’ by developing empowering strategies of communication according to their socio-economic status, as well as the linguistic choices that are available to them. Moroccan women’s communicative strategies are primarily dictated by their geographical origin and level of education. Rural women are predominantly illiterate and,
thus, use female oral literature to empower themselves, and educated urban women use their language skills (code-switching) for the same purpose. Women’s communicative strategies are highly structured; they show that Moroccan women assert themselves in a rigidly patriarchal society although they are not generally associated with the country’s more powerful languages.

**Illiterate women’s strategies of communication**

Illiterate Moroccan women use Berber and/or Moroccan Arabic. Their strategies of communication belong to oral genres that constitute part and parcel of Moroccan deep culture. The historicity and dynamism of these genres have guaranteed their survival over centuries. In spite of the fact that Morocco’s history has been constructed by men and women, female oral genres have been muted in Moroccan recorded history. Oral female genres are ‘unofficial’ voices that ‘circulate’ as ‘anonymous’ literature in the community without being officially recognized. As such, these voices have been powerful in constructing mentalities but they have never gained social authority. The absence of female oral literature in Moroccan culture is mainly due to a rigid patriarchal system regulating gender behavior whereby women are excluded from public authority. Paradoxically, the anonymous aspect of oral female literature has freed women’s self-expression from social constrains and gave it space.

Moroccan women’s association with oral languages and literature is related to their strong association with Morocco’s overall culture as orality is part and parcel of this culture. Moroccan women’s exclusion from social authority legitimizes their central role in the preservation and transmission of private oral languages and the cultural aspects they vehicle.

Illiterate women in Morocco use two mediums of orality: traditional skills and oral literature genres. It is through these two mediums that illiterate women mark their presence in the community and it is also through them that they sometimes subvert the roles that patriarchy assigns them. Women’s agency in oral literature is often perceived as a ‘threat’ to the male
status quo and established order. Expressions like ‘suq nnsa suq metyar’ (a women’s gathering is a dangerous market) clearly attest to this.

The major traditional skills are midwifery, childbearing, child-rearing, preparation of herbal remedies, carpet weaving, hand and feet decorating (henna), and cooking. All women need these skills, but they are often mastered by older women. These skills constitute precious knowledge in the community and they are acquired on the basis of direct empirical sources, experience, practice, and inherited beliefs. The mastery of these skills is not so much based upon ‘knowing what’ as on ‘knowing how’. Socially speaking, these female skills are considered necessary though not ‘prestigious’ or ‘glorious’. Their necessity is often manifested in a set of linguistic rituals that accompany them. For example, henna decoration sessions are accompanied by linguistic rituals in which God and the Prophet are invoked, and carpet weaving is often accompanied by songs and joke telling.

Traditional skills are highly viewed by women who often cherish them by keeping them secret. As such, these skills may be considered ‘gender-specific experiential knowledge’. According to Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff, ‘knowing how’ is as a genuine cognitive activity as ‘knowing that’. Traditional skills are typically learnt in the family and performed in homes. They constitute skills that are passed from mothers to daughters through generations. The learning and performance of these skills are typical female knowledge and knowledge transmission. The acquisition of traditional skills is an opportunity for girls and women to experience typically female sensations that give women authority in all-women gatherings and ‘hidden’ power in society at large.

In spite of the fact that Moroccan women’s traditional skills are respected in their community and recognized to be essential in life, these skills are not considered to be ‘knowledge’ because women who employ them are frequently illiterate and also because their knowledge is not codified; it is oral, practical and experiential and, thus, does not fit in the
‘normative’ and ‘abstract’ type of knowledge that is typically associated with written languages and with men’s knowledge. Women’s traditional skills may be likened to men’s practical skills, for instance agricultural or farming techniques which are likewise unrecognized as ‘knowledge’ in contemporary epistemology.

In addition to traditional skills, Moroccan women use oral literature as a medium of self-expression. Various female oral genres are recognized in Moroccan culture, the most important of which are: gossip, folktales, folk songs, and *halqa* (marketplace oratory).

Gossip is an important female genre in Moroccan culture. The term ‘gossip’ is used in the literature as a cultural trivialization of an authentic female means of expression and mode of speech. Gossip is often celebrated as a typically female verbal culture which has played a significant universal role, historically and in the present. It is a means of negotiating reputations and redefining values. Gossip is of two main types: negative (or malicious) and positive (or complimentary). At the level of discourse, gossip is characterized by first-person narratives of past experiences, as well as of personal accounts and memories. The discourse of gossip is also characterized by a mixture of truth, lies, and legend.

A characteristic of Moroccan women’s gossip is that it depends greatly on the complicity of the participants in gatherings and flourishes in private settings like public baths, tea visits, the hairdresser’s shop, and family celebrations. Gossip also relies on an exclusive audience and the absence of the person(s) who is/are the subject of gossip. Gossip is also characterized by emotional involvement; it ‘publicizes’ private matters and often problematizes the dichotomy of public/private. Although gossip is an oral folkloric event which is practiced and appreciated by both women and men, society does not regard men’s gossip as negative.

Moroccan female gossip is determined by both setting and content. So far as setting is concerned, gossip takes place in small groups of two or more; it is structured in both conversational turn-taking and monologues which occur in various oral genres: narratives,
jokes, proverbs, etc. It usually takes place in all-women groups. As far as content is concerned, gossip topics turn around social themes, mainly divorce, marriage, magic spirits, etc. The topic and length of gossip depend on the immediate interests of particular women.

Moroccan women often perceive the activity of ‘gossiping’ as an opportunity to renegotiate the values and relations of dominance in their immediate environment. For example, upper and middle class urban women, the majority of which living in nuclear families, reconstruct the traditional mother-in-law/daughter-in-law power tension, through a power relationship between them and their maids. Maids are often described as ‘subordinate’, ‘debase’, ‘threatening the family cohesion’, etc. This type of gossip may be regarded as an attempt to negate the centrality of maids to the maintenance of social and family order. On the other hand, maids often construct their female employers as ‘ugly’, ‘old’, ‘bitter’ and ‘snobbish’.26

In addition to gossip, folktales are another type of female oral genres in Morocco. Storytelling is a typical female occupation, especially in rural areas. As with gossip, storytelling takes place in private and rather intimate settings and contrasts sharply with male urban storytelling which usually takes place in public marketplaces such as Jamaa lefna in Marrakech. Folktales are usually told by older women and are characterized by narrative discourse whereby gender and class are often constructed. The languages of female Moroccan folktales are Berber and Moroccan Arabic.

Moroccan women perceive storytelling as a highly worthwhile enterprise. They take the activity of telling stories very seriously; they dramatize events and overemphasize actions in order to make their stories sound important. A way in which women highlight the significance of a tale is by generously giving information about themselves. When telling stories, Moroccan women often involve themselves by attributing vision to their ‘opinions’ and presenting themselves as ‘anticipators’ of events and actions, without, however, overtly committing
themselves. They also make frequent use of moral judgments and critical evaluation, especially of other women.

Storytelling is a strong means of maintaining and perpetuating power inside the family, especially in larger rural households. Grandmothers reinforce their status in the household by establishing strong links with their (usually young) audiences through unfinished stories and suspense. This is understandable in settings where older women feel that younger daughters-in-law are gaining power through having children. Through storytelling to these children, women seek to ‘recuperate’ the children and make themselves ‘indispensable’ at home. On a more abstract level, Moroccan women often manage to empower themselves by expressing women’s intelligence and victory over men in stories. In this way, storytelling may be perceived as a reaction to marginalization.

Older women telling long tales are far from being simple-minded entertainers. They are perceived in the family as almost ‘mystical’ female figures. They exhibit powerful thinking, memory and skillful use of psychological knowledge of human nature. They make the possibility of transforming the world easier to grasp. These attributes are very much associated with the image of the grandmother in Moroccan culture.

Another female oral genre in Morocco is folk songs. Moroccan folk songs are sung in Berber or Moroccan Arabic. These songs sharply contrast with ‘high’ songs that are sung in Standard Arabic. Typical folk songs are usually delivered by illiterate people. Women folk singers have always played an important part in oral literature and culture in Morocco. Female folk singers are usually referred to as shikhats (feminine of shiwukhs). However, whereas the term shiwukhs is neutral, the term shikhats is pejorative and is often used as a synonym for ‘prostitutes’. This appellation greatly marginalizes and damages the reputation of these folk singers. Shikhats are professional women groups of singers of all ages which appeared in Morocco in the 1950s. These women are usually poor and their singing is perceived as a
reaction to marginalization by family and society. Female folk singers sing in all-female or mixed-sex groups. The themes that are treated in their lyrics vary from love to rejection of colonialism, and support of political authorities, etc.

Another, more ‘sophisticated’, type of women’s songs is lmahun. There are three types of lmahun that are sung by women: la’rubiyat, salamat (love letter exchanging), and tadukan (lullabies). Female lmahun songs are different from men’s corresponding songs: first, these songs are performed as part of play or action (e.g. putting babies to sleep by rocking their cradle). These songs focus more closely on the action being performed than on the lyrics of the song. This is a typically female means of transmitting ‘secret’ messages to an addressee. Secondly, female songs are usually brief in comparison to men’s. Short songs presuppose more effort in condensing meanings, intelligence, and skill in transmitting messages. Thirdly, female songs are more subtle and poetic. Fourthly, women’s songs are usually anonymous, whereas men tend to sign their songs. Women’s preference to remain unknown is concordant with the indirectness and the subtlety of their songs, as well as with the ‘un-authorized’ aspect of Moroccan oral literature in general. In sum, Moroccan female popular songs constitute a marginalized female oral genre. As in storytelling, women often involve sections that would empower them and their art. For example, many female songs make fun of men, especially those sung in marriage ceremonies and in all-women gatherings.

Finally, the typically Moroccan oral genre of halqa (public oratory) has started to be appropriated by women. The setting of halqa or public oratory is usually the public marketplace. The discourse of halqa is hybrid; it is both religious and obscene. This discourse is also characterized by curses, oaths, monologue, blessings, and usually aims at involving the audience by making it participate in the halqa rituals.

Another characteristic of the halqa discourse is that it is loaded with misogynistic ideology: women are usually portrayed as social agitators and promoters of social chaos. This
discourse is also characterized by the frequent use of taboo words and expressions which are legitimized by frequent reference to religious sanctioning expressions such as ‘la haya’a fi din’ (there is no shame in religion). The women who speak in halqas are usually poor, illiterate and old. These women address an audience of men and engage in the same misogynistic discourse as men. Although this practice is not feminist, the very presence of women orators in Moroccan marketplaces certainly is. Deborah Kapchan writes “This [halqa’s] feminized discourse, although full of patriarchal traces, nonetheless spins out from itself aetiolating its own boundaries, feeding on its own excess and metamorphizing into other forms.”

Marketplace female orators may sometimes include genuine poets. Mririda is one such poet; she is Berber and became very famous after her death; her poems were gathered, translated into French, and published in a book. However, female public orators, like female singers, are perceived as ‘debased’ and ‘low’; they are doubly marginalized: as women and as lower class.

At the end of this section, it is worth pointing out that although illiterate Moroccan women have always been associated with oral skills and oral literature, the attitude to their modes of expression is not perceived positively on the social level, although the artistic value of this style may be appreciated by society at large. The reason for this resides in the deeply ingrained stereotype that women’s language does not have public authority.

Moroccan women’s skills and oral literature may be considered as sub-cultural varieties which characterize specific, usually rural, all-women peer groups. These skills and oral genres constitute a linguistic reaction to social marginalization. Moroccan women’s communicative styles are a reaction to exclusion from powerful means of expression; they are also a reaction to a male-dominated culture. It is only by taking into account the heavily patriarchal environment in which Moroccan illiterate women live that one may appreciate the extent of their agency and the extreme resourcefulness of their creativity. Moroccan female skills and
oral genres prove that Moroccan women are far from being inarticulate or passive consumers of daily knowledge. The sophistication and high precision which characterize these skills and oral genres attest to women’s presence and power of transforming society. The female genres in Morocco serve as strategies of resistance to prejudice and linguistic restriction; they are a means by which rural and illiterate women differentiate themselves from men and from other (urban, literate) women.

Literate women's strategies of communication

Moroccan literate women use Berber and/or Moroccan Arabic, Standard Arabic, and French. Some may even use English and/or Spanish. Their strategies of communication are different from the ones used by illiterate women. The most important such strategy is code-switching. Code-switching is defined in sociolinguistics as the use of more than one language simultaneously in conversation. Code-switching is a characterizing feature of multilingual settings like Morocco. Linguists have proved that code-switching is a linguistically self-sufficient style of speech and that code-switchers master the languages they mix and are perfectly competent in them. In implying choice on the part of the code-switcher, code switching is a linguistically ‘healthy’ practice. It is a rule-governed phenomenon where the grammar of the mother tongue prevails in the structure of sentences and is ‘completed’ by the lexicon and some minor functional words from the second language. Code-switching presupposes bi- or multi-lingualism and, thus, indicates positive social attributes in Moroccan society. It also indicates composite identities that are aware of the social value of each of the languages used. Code-switching presupposes competence not only in two linguistic codes, but also in appropriately manipulating the two codes in real life contexts.

As four major languages are used in Morocco, code-switching often takes place between a more and a less powerful language and is bound to be sensitive to gender. A
prevalent type of code-switching involves Moroccan Arabic and French. Code-switching involving Moroccan Arabic and Berber is often present in the speech of Berber bilinguals, but this type of code-switching is not gender-sensitive since it involves both women and men. Switching between Berber and French is rather rare, although switching from Rifian Berber to and from Spanish occurs in the north of Morocco.

Code-switching between Moroccan Arabic and French is by far the most widespread and the most revealing. It is common only in urban areas and involves educated bilingual women. Studies have shown that this type of code-switching is more prevalent in the speech of women than in that of men. Frequently, women insert whole sentences in French into their Moroccan Arabic or Berber conversations.

In urban settings, code-switching is a female type of communicative style. This skill is encouraged since childhood, as little girls are more strongly encouraged to use French in their Arabic than are little boys. This is more so the case in the upper and middle class families who are very much in favor of modernity and openness to Western values. This practice is continued into adolescence when female teenagers include French more frequently than male teenagers. This code-switching is often perceived by young females as a means of group solidarity and a means of showing difference from boys.

The use of French in childhood and adolescence is naturally carried into adult life. In fact, Moroccan adult women use code-switching as a means of controlling conversation and keeping the floor for the necessary time without being interrupted. The use of code-switching by women in mixed groups is a means of self-empowerment. Many males are ‘put off’ by this way of communication and prefer to ‘step back’ or remain silent.

Given the overall sociolinguistic status of Moroccan Arabic and French, Moroccan women use code-switching in order to score personal ‘gains’ in everyday conversations. They are aware that French is prestigious in the Moroccan society, and as they are not easily given
the opportunity to use French at the higher levels of decision-making, they overuse it in conversation. Through code-switching, women easily succeed in getting and maintaining attention.

In general, when borrowing words from French, a man will ‘mold’ the loans in the general morpho-syntactic structure of Moroccan Arabic, whereas a woman will pronounce the loans as they are pronounced in French. Thus, whereas a woman would say ‘le frigidaire’ (fridge) a man would pronounce the word as \(lfrijidir\) where the sound \(l\) is prefixed to the word to make it sound more like ‘Moroccan Arabic’. Further, whereas a woman would pronounce the ‘r’ sound in the French way (an alveolar thrill), a man would readily use the Arabic ‘rolled’ ‘r’. The following are more such examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French words</th>
<th>Female version</th>
<th>Male version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garage</td>
<td>Garage</td>
<td>lgaraj</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>La France</td>
<td>fransa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journal</td>
<td>Le journal</td>
<td>jjernan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Train</td>
<td>Le train</td>
<td>tran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veste</td>
<td>La veste</td>
<td>lfista</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jardin</td>
<td>Le jardin</td>
<td>jjerda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vitesse</td>
<td>La vitesse</td>
<td>lfitas</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women tend to prefix the French words with the French article (le or la) whereas men would readily use the Moroccan Arabic ‘l’ which originates from the Standard Arabic definite
article ‘al’ but which is not used as an article but as part of words in Moroccan Arabic. These phonological adaptations are more evident in words that have been relatively recently borrowed from French into Moroccan Arabic. Earlier borrowed words that have become part of Moroccan Arabic are pronounced in the same way by women and men. Examples of the latter are shanty for ‘sentier’ (small road), tomobil for ‘automobile’ (car), and lkartab for ‘cartable’ (school bag).

In general, women differ from men in Morocco so far as the morphological ‘molding’ of borrowed words is concerned: women use less of it than men. Thus, whereas a Moroccan man would easily say rkebt f tran lyum (I have taken the train today), a woman would use the French counterpart as it is used in French and say rkebt f le train lyum.

The following sentences are produced by women in the city of Fes. The underlined strings are in French:

(1) a. mshat pour retirer son passeport, u matji htta lRedda.

She went to withdraw her passport and will not be back until tomorrow.

b. quil haa ce n’est pas la peine de crier, ila mabRash lweld iqra ma’endha matdir.

I told her there was no need to scream, if her son would not study, there is nothing she can do.

In the above examples, whole sentences in French are inserted in the Moroccan Arabic ones. These sentences are spoken in their French version.
Moroccan women’s use of code-switching may also be considered as a way of stripping everyday Moroccan language from the religious aura that surrounds Standard Arabic and that automatically excludes women. Finally, code-switching means identity-switching. It is a way of ‘demarcating’ oneself as different not only in relation to men but also in relation to other (rural and often illiterate) women.

**Conclusion**

This paper has dealt with some aspects of language and gender in Morocco. More specifically, it has described settings where women’s linguistic agency is strongly perceived. Moroccan women use specific linguistic strategies to assert themselves according to the choices they have and the situations they find themselves in. These strategies depend greatly on whether these women are literate or illiterate. Women’s choice and use of language helps them negotiate power. Up to now, linguistic issues have been largely subordinated to broad historical and cultural discussions. It is high time language and gender in Morocco was given serious attention as a promising field of research.

**References**


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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.


9 Ibid

10 The first women’s studies program was established in 1999 at the University of Rabat and the first gender studies program was launched in 2001 at the University of Fes.


16 See section below on French.


20 According to Aristotle, knowledge may come in one of two forms: propositional and practical.

22 Ibid


24 Ibid


26 For examples, see Fatima Sadiqi, Women, Gender and Language (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishes, 2003).


