

Moroccan Arabic-French Bilinguals and World-View¹

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Abstract

Moroccans in general tend to associate Arabic with past traditions and French with modernity. Beyond this explicit attitude towards these two languages, the present study addressed the question of whether Moroccan Arabic-French bilinguals implicitly view the world around them differently when they use one or the other language. To investigate this possibility, a sentence completion test in two versions, one in Arabic and one in French, was administered on two different occasions to Moroccan male and female balanced bilinguals. The completions of an identical set of incomplete sentences in Arabic and in French that were obtained were then compared. The results appeared to indicate that there were fewer contrasts between the Arabic and French completions than was suggested in a previous study where modern ideas were exclusively conveyed through French whereas traditional values were suggested by the Arabic completions. What the results of the present study seem to suggest is that Moroccan Arabic-French bilinguals do not generally associate Arabic or French with a particular cultural system.

Keywords: Bilingualism, World-view, Arabic, French, Morocco.

Introduction

There seems to be some ambivalence in the attitudes of the people of the Maghreb towards Arabic. As Ennaji (1991: 8) notes, being the language of the holy Koran as well as pan-Arab nationalism, Arabic was used to rally the efforts of the Maghreb nationalist movements in their struggle for independence. Soon after independence, however, the common belief among the elites of these countries was that Arabic was of little value in the modern world whereas French was the key to professional success and social promotion. Indeed, a number of studies on language attitudes in Morocco, for example, agree that Moroccans tend to consciously associate Arabic with Moroccan traditions and Islamic values whereas they think of French as the language of modern civilization (See, for example, Bentahila, 1983; Boukous, 1985, 1995; Elbiad, 1985, 1991; Ennaji, 1991, 2005; among others).

Beyond the conscious attitude that Moroccans tend to have towards the two languages themselves, Arabic and French, the question which is addressed in the present study is of a slightly different order. It revolves around the possibility for Moroccan Arabic-French bilinguals to implicitly see the world around them differently when they use Arabic or French. The main issue which is at stake here is whether Moroccan Arabic-French bilinguals have two distinct systems of values,

¹ I would like to thank the audiences at the conference "Languages, Cultures and Interculture" at Sidi Belabbes University, Algeria, and at the conference "Discourse and Cultures in Contact" at Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Morocco for their remarks, comments and criticisms that have largely contributed to improve the structure and contents of this paper. My thanks extend to the organizers and sponsors of these two events as well as to the doctoral school EDOLAS at the University of Oran Es-senia, Algeria, for their generous hospitality and special consideration.

or world views, each associated with a particular language. To investigate this possibility, a sentence completion test was designed in two versions, one in Arabic and one in French. The test consisted of a set of incomplete sentences in which two completions of each sentence were obtained from each respondent, one in French and one in Arabic. The completion test was administered on two occasions to male and female balanced bilinguals from Fez and its region. The analysis of the completions obtained in this way consisted of comparing the Arabic completions to the corresponding French ones. The results of the test appeared to indicate that the contrasts between the Arabic and French completions were not as clear as what was suggested in an earlier study where modern ideas were exclusively conveyed through French whereas typical traditional values were only suggested by the Arabic completions (Bentahila, 1983). The results of the present study, in fact, seem to suggest that Arabic-French bilinguals do not generally associate Arabic or French with a particular cultural system.

This paper is organized into four parts. In the first part, it will look at some previous research that has inspired the present study. This part is followed by a description of the research tools, namely the questionnaire used in the study, the population of respondents, as well as the method of administering the questionnaire. The findings of the study are presented and discussed in the third part, and the end the paper concludes with a brief discussion of some limitations as well as the possible implications of the study.

1. Notes on Previous Research

Within the social psychology of bilingualism, studies on the possibility that bilinguals may develop two different world-views, each associated with a particular language, have been carried out in a number of contexts. For example, Ervin-Tripp (1964) used Thematic Apperception Test Cards containing ambiguous content to investigate the effect of language on the perception of this content. When French-English bilinguals were, on two different occasions, asked to tell a story about these picture cards, each time in a different language, there were significant differences between the French and English stories in three out of nine cases. While this technique was quite successful in capturing the desired phenomena, it also presented a number of difficulties. The administration and interpretation of the so-called Thematic Apperception Cards requires specific training that the majority of linguists do not have. In order to avoid these technical difficulties, a much simpler test by the same author (Ervin-Tripp, 1967) later used a sentence completion task that was administered to Japanese-English bilinguals, again in two languages on separate occasions, and the bilinguals' sentence completions were found to be closer to Japanese norms when completed in the Japanese language than when completed in English. The results of the study thus provided some evidence that bilinguals did alter their attitudes and outlook depending on whether they used one language or the other. In the Moroccan context, Bentahila (1983) applied a similar sentence-completion test to Arabic-

French bilinguals. This study seemed to confirm that, for those bilinguals, there were many more references to religion, religious duties and typically traditional and nationalist values in the Arabic completions. On the other hand, there were many more references to the values of liberation, good education, and active pursuits in the French completions. The author concludes by stating that those contrasts "[...] offer some confirmation of the hypothesis that the Moroccan bilingual's attitude to the world varies, depending on which language he is using." (Bentahila, 1983: 48).

3. The Study

To investigate the possibility that the Moroccan Arabic-French bilingual's view of the world may vary according to the language he/she is using, the present study used a sentence completion test that is closely similar to the one developed by Bentahila (1983). The sentence-completion test was administered to fifty individuals, but only twenty-four (six females and eighteen males) returned both versions of the questionnaire². The respondents were balanced bilinguals of ages ranging from twenty-two to fifty-two, all of them living in the city of Fez and the neighboring town of Sefrou. They included mainly university students of French and secondary school teachers of French. These were given a list of twenty-five incomplete sentences in one language and were asked to complete them in any way they wished. Then, three weeks later, they were given the corresponding incomplete sentences in the other language, and were again asked to complete them³. The interval was used in order that the respondents, when completing the second set of sentences, would not remember what they had written in their earlier completions. The administration of the test followed the split-half method; some respondents were given the French versions of the sentences on the first occasion, and some the Arabic ones. On the second administration, the languages were reversed so that at the end two sets of completions of the sentences were obtained from each respondent in Arabic and in French.

4. Results

The analysis of the completions that were obtained from the respondents in the present study consisted of counting the frequency of reference to – or the explicit occurrence of – a set of ten key notions in the Arabic completions and in the French ones. These key notions are the following: Religion, Charity, Family bonds, Traditions, Patriotism, Leisure activities, Individual rights, Knowledge, Children's education, and Love and happiness. The figures that were obtained are summarized in the following table:

² The questionnaire was administered at the very end of the school year and almost half of the questionnaires were not returned because it was impossible to contact some respondents during the holidays.

³ Unlike the study conducted by Bentahila (1983) where six weeks separated the administration of the two versions of the questionnaire, in this study only three weeks could be given as an interval.

	Arabic	French
Religion	04	11
Charity	02	10
Family bonds	05	11
Traditions	01	01
Patriotism	02	01
Leisure activities	18	15
Individual rights	14	17
Knowledge	10	10
Children's education	09	09
Love and happiness	04	07

One striking finding in this study is that there are many more explicit references to religion in the French completions than there are in the Arabic ones. For example, for the sentence "The future depends on...", a respondent wrote in French, "Le futur dépend de la volonté divine," [The future depends on God's will]. Other than religion, the remaining completions of the same sentence mention hard work, good education and high qualifications in Arabic as well as in French. Moreover, references to religion in French are also found in the sentence "In order to succeed in life, one must..." as did one respondent who wrote, "Pour réussir dans la vie, il faut croire en Dieu," [In order to succeed in life, one must believe in God]. On the other hand, no one mentions the need to be religious in the Arabic completions of the two sentences. This is rather surprising because in the study by Bentahila (1983), there were numerous references to religion in the Arabic completions only, whereas none of the French completions apparently mentioned it.

Another notion which is generally considered a religious duty is charity. It turns out again that this notion is more frequently cited in the French completions than in the Arabic ones. In ten cases, the respondents mentioned charity and helping the poor when completing the sentence "Rich people can afford to..." whereas only two respondents did so in the Arabic completions. In the same vein, when completing the sentence "I like to read..." none of the respondents wrote "religious books" in Arabic or French contrary to the findings reported by Bentahila (idem). On the other hand, newspapers, magazines, adventures stories, and different sorts of literary works are very often cited in the present study in Arabic as well as in French.

In general, the completions also suggest that family bonds are very important. However, only five completions mention the importance of family bonds in Arabic whereas eleven do so in the French ones. For example, when completing the sentence "Ce que j'aime le plus dans la vie c'est ..." a very frequent completion was "Ce que j'aime le plus dans la vie c'est ma famille," [What I love most in life is my family.] Indeed, a significant number of respondents mention parents, the family, and children. Other completions of the

same sentence in the two languages mention one's professional career, success, freedom, personal dignity, happiness, love, or living a peaceful life.

When it comes to leisure activities, fifteen respondents mention constructive activities like sports, travel, reading, and music in French, and eighteen do so in Arabic. It appears that when reading is suggested, this is done as often in the Arabic as in the French completions. Or conversely, when passiveness is suggested, it is mentioned in the two languages. For example, when completing the sentence, "When I have nothing to do..." many respondents mention watching TV, sitting in cafés or doing crossword puzzles in the two languages. When they happen to mention sports, reading, travel or other constructive activities, this generally comes up again in the two languages.

Reference is also frequently made to freedom and individual rights in the Arabic as well as the French completions. For example, some respondents came up with the following sentence, "Ce qui est le plus important pour une femme marocaine c'est la liberté." [What is most important for a Moroccan woman is freedom.]. Many sentences, however, mention the importance of marriage for Moroccan women and this was in Arabic as well as in French. Other than this, sentences where freedom is mentioned include these: "Ce que j'aime le plus dans la vie c'est ma liberté," [What I love most in life is my freedom,] or again "Les enfants doivent être libres," [Children must be free]. Interestingly, when the need for children to obey or respect their parents and follow their advice is mentioned, this is done in French as well as in Arabic.

One more idea that is often cited in the Arabic completions in Bentahila's study (*idem*) is the appeal to the notion of fate in the Arabic completions. Surprisingly enough, except for one respondent who mentions the need to have good luck in Arabic, all the other respondents in the present study mention the need to struggle, work hard, and the need to acquire knowledge in science and technology when completing sentences like "The future depends on..." or "In order to succeed in one's life..." Thus, it appears that on this particular point, the majority of Moroccan bilinguals are able to convey particular attitudes and values regardless of whether they use Arabic or French to express themselves.

Conclusion

It is perhaps worth stressing at this point that the present study is simply meant to stimulate interest from researchers in Morocco and other neighboring Francophone countries in the issues that are raised. Needless to say that the size of the population of respondents in the study is far from being representative of Moroccan balanced Arabic-French bilinguals in Fez and Sefrou, let alone the entire country, or even the Francophone North African region. Nevertheless, the results prove to meet the aims of the study in that they give a rather different picture from what previous research came up to many decades ago. Therefore, these results call for larger-scale and up-to-date studies of the issues that are raised in this paper.

It is no less obvious that Bentahila's study (1983) was conducted in the early eighties when Moroccan traditional culture was apparently totally dissociated from modern ideas as are typically conveyed through French. Thirty years later, however, many liberal ideas seem to have made their way into Moroccan society and culture. For example, one theme that was difficult to discuss in public in the 1970s and even the 1980s last century – except perhaps by political activists – was that of Human Rights. On the other hand, the issue of Human Rights nowadays is a widely discussed topic in the official as well as the popular media, civil society forums, and even in casual chats on buses, trains and in coffee shops. Therefore, given the more recent evolution of the Moroccan society and the whole North African region, it is quite legitimate to question the results of previous research as well as their significance at the present time, and the general the picture that this research gives about Arabic-French bilingualism in this region. It is then of vital importance to conduct large-scale investigations of these and other related issues in order to provide a more up-to-date understanding of bilingualism and other related phenomena in Francophone North African countries. What the present study seems to suggest is that traditional culture and modern ideas in Morocco have considerably converged to the extent that it is no longer possible to associate a particular language with a cultural system.

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