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FRENCH DOMINANCE AND ARABIC MARGINALIZATION: LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND POWER IN POSTCOLONIAL MOROCCAN EDUCATION

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Abstract

Since gaining independence from French colonial rule in 1956, Morocco has officially recognized Arabic and Amazigh as national languages. Nonetheless, French continues to hold a dominant position in the country's educational system and public administration, particularly in science, technology, and higher education. This study investigates the enduring influence of French from a postcolonial perspective, analyzing how language operates as a mechanism of power, identity construction, and social mobility. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, this study argues that the persistence of French reflects more than colonial residue—it embodies epistemological hierarchies established during colonial rule. These hierarchies elevate Western knowledge systems and languages while framing Arabic, despite its status as both national and religious language, as traditional and less capable of supporting modern scientific discourse. This perception undermines Arabic's historical role as a language of Islamic scholarship and scientific advancement during the Islamic Golden Age. This study also applies Faron's theory of linguistic capital to demonstrate the dominance of French perpetuates social inequality, granting disproportionate advantages to French-speaking elites while limiting opportunities for Arabic-educated populations. This dynamic exposes tensions between Morocco's Islamic cultural foundations and the continued privileging of a colonial language. Through qualitative case studies and library research, this study highlights the implications of Morocco's linguistic hierarchy on national identity, educational access, and the broader struggle for postcolonial sovereignty. The findings suggest that the linguistic preference for French undermines the potential for a decolonized, culturally rooted education system that aligns with Morocco's Islamic heritage and aspirations for independent knowledge production.

Keywords: Arabic Language; Islamic Cultural; Linguistic Hierarchy; Postcolonial

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INTRODUCTION

The Amazigh plays a crucial role in shaping the cultural identity of the interior tribal communities in Morocco, often referred to as the Amazigh or Berber communities. From a sociolinguistic viewpoint, language serves as both a means of communication and a symbol of shared identity and cultural expression. The linguistic dynamic, however, began to undergo significant changes in the 7th century, as the expansion of Islam in the region. The process of Islamization, led by the Umayyad dynasty, introduced Arabic as a tool for both religious propagation and administrative governance. Uqba ibn Nafi' played a crucial role in this expansion, particularly through the establishment of the city of Kairouan in 670 CE. This city became a key center for the spread of Islamic teaching and Arab culture in the Maghreb. Kairouan served as a strategic religious and administrative hub, from which Arabic spread through institutions such as Mosque, Madrasahs and caliphal bureaucracies. Arabic gained political and religious legitimacy through this institutionalization process, further solidifying its position as the official language in religious, legal and educational spheres (Enaji, 2009).

Between 1912 and 1956, Moroccan history was shaped by the French Protectorate, which functioned as a colonial regime. The covert nature of the conquest extended beyond military occupation; colonial influence permeated various spheres, most notably through the introduction of the French language, which served a function beyond mere communication (Boulahnane, 2018). The treaty of Fès in 1912 formally established Morocco as a French protectorate, giving the colonial administration full control over the country's affairs. The treaty legitimized France's military and administrative presence under the pretext of ensuring stability and security, effectively transferring sovereign authority to the colonial regime. French intervention went beyond military dominance, extending into administrative and cultural realms. This included language policies that deliberately prioritized French over other languages such as Amazigh and Arabic (Cambridge University Press, 1912).

One of the central figures behind the colonial linguistic agenda was Hubert Lyautey, Morocco's first Resident General, who institutionalized the use of French through colonial education and administrative structures. French quickly came to be perceived as a symbol of modernity and elitism, while local languages particularly Amazigh were systematically excluded from formal institutions. The French strategy reinforced Arab-Amazigh divisions through a dual administrative system. In doing so, colonialism did not merely usurp political sovereignty; it actively reconstructed a language-based social hierarchy (Hannoum, 2015). The French colonial administration in Morocco played a key role in marginalizing the Arabic language, particularly through its educational policies. The 1930 Berber Decree (Dahir Berbère)

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established schools that excluded Arabic, instead promoting Berber written in the Roma alphabet. Although this initiate aimed to assimilate the Berber population, it intentionally weakened Arabic's position as a core element of Moroccan national identity. The term's 'Berber' was introduced to draw ethnic distinction between Arabs and Berbers, serving as a tool to legitimate colonial culture, economic and social policies (Tilmantine, 2018).

From the colonial period through to the postmodern era, France's historical ties to Arabic langue and its speakers have played a significant role in shaping its language education policies. French colonial education policy has advanced a driven agenda with French education positioned at its core. French administration stating that for the lasting establishment of the French influence in Morocco, every school that opens is more valuable than a battle won". After Morocco gained independence, despite the departure of French colonials and the introduction of Arabization policies, Moroccans did not fully reclaim control over their own futures. Instead, a system of privilege French in its design but Moroccan in its execution persisted. Morocco also emphasized the importance of retaining the French language as essential for nation building efforts and for projecting an image of itself as a modern state. France reinforced its linguistic dominance through educational policies designed to acculturate an elite class, strategically tied to socioeconomic advantages, in order to entrench its influence in the Maghreb (Chakrani, 2021).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The colonial legacy of France created a symbolic power structure that positioned the French language as a marker of intellectual and economic superiority. As said explains, colonial influence did not end after formal independence, but continued to live on through language and institutions, including education and public policy. Thus, the main research question driving this study are:

1. How do language policies in Post colonial Moroccan education reflect the power dynamics between France and Morocco?
2. How has the tension between Arabization and the continued dominance of French shaped language use and identity in Moroccan education?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In his work *Orientalism*, Edward Said argued that colonialism did not only take place through physical domination, but also through the domination of discourse and knowledge. The West constructed representations of the East as 'the Other', inferior and in need of guidance. This representation legitimises colonial domination and continues in the form of cultural and linguistic power in the postcolonial era. '...the

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essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between western superiority and oriental inferiority...' (Said, 2003:42). Western countries, in the book Orientalism written by Edward Said, are portrayed as superior, powerful, articulate and advanced. Meanwhile, the East is the binary opposition of the West. Eastern countries are portrayed as inferior, weak, and undeveloped. Said explained that Orientalist representation is a discourse construction used to justify and maintain colonial power.

Frantz Fanon, in Black Skin, White Masks (1952 for French Edition), emphasises the psychological impact of colonialism on colonised individuals and communities. Fanon sees language as a profound instrument of power (Fanon, 2008:39), when colonised people are forced to use the language of the coloniser, they experience alienation from their own culture and identity. Fanon states that any colonised person, in whom an inferiority complex has been embedded, will encounter the language of the colonising nation as a representation of metropolitan culture. Why is this so? This unhappy state of affairs results in three conditions that underlie the process of identification in the analysis of desire. First, in order to 'exist' or come into being, one must enter into the body, into the perspective, and into the location or place of the other. Secondly, the actual space of identification that exists in demands and desires is a divided space. What is meant by split here is that the indigenous fantasy occupies the space of the other/settler. Meanwhile, the indigenous retain and maintain their own space. 'Black skin white mask' is not a pure division. It is an image of the body that is doubled, hidden in two places in one period of time. Thirdly, the issue of identification is never an affirmation of a preconceived identity, nor is it a refinement of the self. The demand for identification, that is, to be 'the Other' entails the representation of the subject in a different demand from the Other (Bhabha, 2012).

PREVIOUS STUDIES

The topic of Arabic marginalization and French dominance in Morocco has been widely discussed in academic literature, highlighting how colonial legacies continue to shape educational policy and postcolonial linguistic identity. Although Arabic is the national language, it is structurally marginalized, while French maintains dominance in public spaces and higher education—creating tension between national identity and the political realities of language. In his article, Brauer (2025) explores how postcolonial Maghrebi literature often falls into a false dichotomy between Arabic and French, overlooking the Amazigh language. He introduces the concept of "Tamazgha French" to describe how Amazigh identity and culture persist through the colonial language. Meanwhile, Fitriyah & Fadhl (2025) emphasize that the dominance of Arabic and French threatens the survival of Amazigh culture, calling for more inclusive language policies. Bounouche (2025) analyzes the inconsistency of Morocco's language policy in education, arguing that it is driven more by political and economic

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factors than pedagogical ones. The article adds to these discussions by showing how Arabic, despite being ideologically positioned as a postcolonial symbol of nationalism, is still vulnerable to symbolic and systemic forms of colonial dominance.

RESEARCH METOD

This study uses a qualitative, library-based research method to explore the dominance of French and the marginalization of Arabic in postcolonial Moroccan education. Drawing on discourse analysis and postcolonial theory, data is collected from scholarly articles, policy reports, and key works by Edward Said and Frantz Fanon. As Saré (1980) notes, such information is documented across various textual sources. This approach allows for a critical interpretation of language as a tool of power and representation, focusing not on statistical measurement but on uncovering meanings, ideologies, and hidden power relations within language practices and education policy.

RESEARCH AND FINDING

Educational Policies as a Continuation of Colonial Power: The Role of French in Moroccan School

Since gaining independence in 1956, Morocco's education system has remained a constant topic of debate and controversy across various national platforms. Since the French colonial administration viewed traditional Moroccan schools as outdated and underdeveloped, they created their own educational institutions to assert dominance and use educations as a tool of ideological control during the early years of the protectorate. This colonial education system promoted concepts such as republicanism, liberalism, and socialism while simultaneously advancing an essentialist and anti-liberal narrative that emphasized cultural and separation (Bouyahya, 2020). The protectorate established schools that reflected the social status of each Moroccan group, offering distinct form of education tailored to specific roles within the colonial structure. These schools functioned as instruments to reinforce the colonial hierarchy.

The French educational model in Morocco was strategically crafted to integrate Moroccan cultural identity with the colonial educational agenda, allowing it to extend its control with subtlety and calculated precision. Following independence and the democratization of education, French gradually become more entrenched in Moroccan society. As school enrolment increased, the language gained prominence due to its essential role in key sectors such as administration, tourism, and the job market particularly in the private sector. Despite efforts at Arabization after independence in other areas of education, French continued to be dominant language of instruction in

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higher education. As a result faced significant challenges when transitioning from primary and secondary schools, where Standard Arabic was the medium of instruction, to higher education, where French was used for scientific and academic learning (Kolli, 2024).

Although it lacks official status, French is widely regarded as Morocco's primary foreign language. French remained the language of instruction until the 1970s, when Morocco adopted the Arabization in primary and secondary education was not achieved until 1990, and scientific and technical fields in higher education continued to be taught in French. This inconsistency in language instruction across educational levels created significant challenges, particularly for students who had studied in Arabic and then struggled to adapt to university programs. As a result, many secondary school graduates had limited French proficiency, leaving little prepared for higher education and disadvantaged in the job market compared to their French-educated peers. This gap in language skills led to better employment opportunities and higher salaries for the latter, ultimately undermining the long-standing Arabization (Boussakou, 2023).

The Francophone Educational Legacy in Morocco: Language, Privilege, and Postcolonial Stratification

The ideology of Francophonie emerges in response to France's loss of Algeria and other former colonies, which it had once sought to integrate as inseparable parts of its national territory. This ideology is rooted not in military or political dominance, but in cultural and linguistic hegemony. Through the promotion and celebration of Francophonie, France seeks to compensate for its diminished international status. France continues to cultivate an elite class through its educational system. In 2015, Maghrebi students made up approximately 24,000 of France's foreign student population accounting for half of all international students in the country (Smail, 2017). The French government holds an ambivalent attitude toward these students while their presence is seen as beneficial for extending French influence in countries like Morocco, their potential permanent settlement in France is often met with local resistance.

France has enforced its linguistic hegemony through education by implementing policies designed to acculturate an elite class with socioeconomic incentives that help maintain French influence in Maghreb. Today, the educational system continues to reinforce linguistic hierarchies marginalizing Arabic-speaking students and resisting their opportunities for socio-economic advancement (Bouoiyour, 2014). Although the French education system limited Moroccans' academic pathways primarily to France, its policies have further entrenched dependence on the French language by shaping knowledge, aspiration, and belief systems fostering enduring worldviews, and drawing on long-standing reservoirs of human capital. English has emerged as a powerful alternative in Morocco, challenging

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the long – standing nation that global mobility and access are attainable solely through the French language.

The framing of Arabic through the lens of communitarianism serves to displace it from its status as global language, reducing it to a marginalized one whose inclusion in school deemed undeserved. This institutionalization of Arabic in the educational system remains highly contested, as it would grant the language economic value and symbolic prestige, thereby transforming it into a marketable asset in the French educational sphere(Lokmane, 2024). The debate over Arabic language instruction in the French education system underscore the need to critically examine the ideological foundation of language policies and their role in sustaining French linguistic dominance both domestically and internationally often expense of the cultural diversity and linguistic heritage of its own citizens.

The Marginalisation of Arabic in Public Spaces

a. Arabic Language and Multiple Alienations

The alienation of Moroccan society then makes them feel even more marginalised, inferior and still in the shadow of colonialism. As explained by Faron, this unpleasant situation makes Moroccans who were previously fine with Arabic underlie themselves into a body and perspective that is stronger than themselves in order not to be marginalised. This policy instability has resulted in the marginalisation of Arabic in educational, social and economic spaces. Mouassine & Fatmi (2025) argue that society has a perception of Arabic as less prestigious.

In the context of internationalisation, Arabic is often perceived as less prestigious than foreign languages such as French and English. This has an impact on students' and lecturers' preferences in choosing the language of instruction, which in turn strengthens the position of foreign languages and marginalises Arabic in the academic environment. Students who come from Arabic-based educational backgrounds face challenges in attending lectures delivered in a foreign language. This limitation hampers their academic performance and restricts their access to wider employment opportunities, which often require mastery of a foreign language.

Iazzetta (2024) also explains that French is used to attract upper-class students so that they have access to higher quality learning. According to him, the choice of language in education and daily life is strongly influenced by an individual's socio-economic status. Students from the upper social class tend to use French and have greater access to educational institutions that use the language, while those from the lower social class are more limited to the use of Arabic and have limited access to prestigious institutions. This suggests that Arabic is often associated with lower social status, reinforcing the marginalisation of the language in the context of education and social mobility.

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At the same time, private educational institutions also play a major role in reinforcing the dominance of French. These institutions use French as the main language of instruction, which attracts students from high socio-economic backgrounds and reinforces the perception that mastery of French is the key to academic and professional success. As a result, Arabic is increasingly marginalised in elite educational contexts and considered less prestigious.

Through the lens of Frantz Fanon's postcolonial theory, these dynamics reflect the mental and cultural conditions of postcolonial societies that are still burdened by the trauma of colonisation. Fanon emphasises that colonialism does not only control physical territory, but also damages the psychological and cultural structures of the colonised subject. The language of the coloniser—in this case French—became a symbol of superiority, progress and institutional legitimacy. Meanwhile, Arabic, which should be an integral part of Moroccan national identity, is systematically excluded from modern domains such as science, technology and state administration.

This condition creates a layered alienation. Firstly, there is alienation from one's mother tongue and cultural heritage, as the younger generation is taught that progress can only be achieved through the acquisition of foreign languages. Secondly, people experience alienation in social and political life, as they must constantly navigate between Arabic as a symbol of local culture and French as the key to access to power and social mobility. In Fanon's perspective, this is a form of colonisation of the mind, where the postcolonial subject remains within the framework of colonial domination despite being politically independent. The French language is not only maintained, but also given a hegemonic position in the social structure, thus perpetuating inequality and fuelling the division of national identity.

b. Arabic and Colonial Legacies: Marginalisation Amidst Failed Decolonisation

In everyday practice, Moroccans are widely aware that they are still under the linguistic hegemony of French, even though Arabic has been constitutionally recognised as the national and official language of the country. This awareness triggered systematic language decolonisation efforts by the state, one of which was to make Arabic the language of instruction in the education system, especially at the secondary and tertiary levels. However, these efforts have failed significantly. One of the main causes is the discrepancy between normative language policies (de jure) and language practices that take place in society (de facto).

Iazzetta (2024) makes an important contribution in tracing and explaining this dynamic. He reveals that although Arabic has been designated as an official language and is formally used in primary education, French has maintained its dominance in various strategic sectors, especially in higher education, science, technology, administration and the economy. French also remains a symbol of

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social status and access to higher professional opportunities, which makes it remain a language of prestige in Morocco's social structure.

This imbalance creates a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, the state advocates the use of Arabic as a form of resistance to the colonial legacy; on the other hand, the reliance on French in key sectors actually strengthens the position of the language and weakens the presence of Arabic in public and professional spaces. As a result, Arabic experienced a subtle but systematic form of marginalisation - it was symbolically present in official documents and state speeches, but not strong enough to compete functionally in the modern socio-economic context. This situation shows that language decolonisation is not just a matter of replacing a colonial language with a national language, but also demands structural changes in the education system, the labour market, and people's perception of the value and function of language. Without deep changes at this level, decolonisation tends to stop at the symbolic level, while colonial practices continue in a new form.

Laroussi & Laalou (2024) highlight that inconsistency and exclusivity in language policy in Morocco has significantly impacted the construction of national identity, particularly in the context of its multilingual and multicultural society. Although Modern Standard Arabic is officially recognised as the state language and used in formal institutions, the reality is that not all Moroccans feel represented by this language in their daily lives. Amazigh, the native language of a large number of the population, and Darija, a dialect of Moroccan Arabic commonly used in everyday social interactions, are often subordinated in the realms of education, administration and mainstream media. This imbalance of representation not only creates a distance between state policies and the social realities of society, but also reinforces feelings of alienation, marginalisation and cultural marginalisation for those groups whose languages are not fairly accommodated. In this context, Laalou argues that the state's failure to formulate an inclusive language policy is a form of failed decolonisation, where the colonial legacy of placing certain languages as superior continues to be reproduced in contemporary Moroccan linguistic practices.

Thus, the marginalisation of Arabic in Morocco is not only a linguistic policy issue, but also a manifestation of unhealed colonial wounds. This means that the colonial legacy, particularly the use of French, is deeply rooted in Moroccan society. No matter how hard certain groups try to fight back, they fail. All walks of life are dominated by the French language. This shows how language can be a tool of cultural domination that alienates people from themselves and creates an identity crisis in a postcolonial space.

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CONCLUSION

Edward Said, in *Orientalism* illustrates how the West's construction of the East (including the Arab world) is grounded in a logic of domination and representation that positions the East as passive, static, and inferior. Within this framework, the Arabic language is often reduced to a language of religion or tradition, rather than one of modernity or rationality. Said argues that the process of *othering*—that is, positioning the East as an exotic and irrational “other”—contributes to the legitimization of the marginalization of the Arabic language in intellectual discourse and public policy.

Fanon writes, “To speak is to exist absolutely for the other”, emphasizing that speaking in the language of the colonizer entails striving to exist within a world shaped by colonial systems, even after formal colonization has ended. In this context, Arabic becomes a language of the “other,” symbolically marginalized from structures of power. This sense of alienation is not merely psychological but also deeply political, as Moroccan society is compelled to function within a social system that does not fully reflect its own cultural values and modes of expression.

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