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The Politeness/Impoliteness Divide  
English-Based Theories and Speech Acts  
Practice in Moroccan Arabic

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UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA  
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*To my Mum*  
*To the memory of my Dad*





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## Prologue

The study of the rules governing communicative practice in different languages and cultures is a broad and vibrant area of research. Yet work here has tended to develop through a theoretical framework based on, or heavily influenced by, the English language and the Anglo-Saxon cultural domain. This presence of *English in the World* has not always been addressed with the necessary critical attitude. If languages impose in some way a particular world view, this will in turn condition and affect the way we deal with how other people communicate, create mental states and propose different views on reality through their language. This is not a new issue in Western culture. Let us recall the usual connotation of the term 'barbarian', first used by the ancient Greeks to point to foreign peoples, due to their way of speaking. Consider also the way Latin grammar and the Christian tradition imposed a particular perspective on the description of aboriginal languages and cultures after the 'discovery' of America. In more general terms, a Western cultural filter has conditioned the approach to the description of a range of phenomena in different colonial and postcolonial processes. These days the English language has come to serve as the primary means of global communication, yet both the language and the Anglo-Saxon culture associated with it impose certain biases on the view of other linguistic and cultural spaces.

This book seeks to avoid this kind of bias in cross-cultural pragmatics. It contains a proposal for an encounter between English-based theories, developed from a Western cultural perspective, and communicative practices characterising the cultural ethos and language of Morocco. The study will focus on three types of speech acts, relating to the use of thanks and apologies, to the formulation of invitations, and to complimenting behaviour. Together these will provide three perspectives from which to establish a consistent and internally cohesive account of a particular interpretation of the concept of politeness, of the social image involved when performing these speech acts and, finally, of the nature of these communicative acts in the Moroccan cultural context. The book offers, by means of this combination of perspectives on Moroccan communicative practice, an integrated empirical field with which the theoretical models can establish a truly fruitful dialogue. This entails, as a first



step, avoiding the assessment of the communicative behaviour of others in terms of deviant or 'exotic' interpretations. This study by Saida Anssari-Naim constitutes a valuable contribution to research in cross-cultural pragmatics, but, moreover, should be praised for its unique attempt to transform our perspective on the alien, from the uncritical view of oddity to the insight of a true alterity.

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## Introduction

The aim of this book is to illustrate the way in which a theoretical discourse on politeness, based on a specific linguistic-cultural framework, can challenge the practice of politeness in a language and culture with a different tradition. Certainly, this kind of contrast is common in the academic literature dealing with the intercultural dimension of pragmatics. The theoretical discourse on politeness should be understood in close relation to the linguistic and cultural context in which it is historically conceived, i.e. the English language and the associated Anglo-Saxon culture, with all the nuances that this generalization entails. Assigning such a discourse the role of a universal framework brings with it interpretative biases, as well as the danger of overlooking meaningful facets in the description of other cultural and linguistic domains. This interpretative bias is inevitable, considering that the interest and quality of a theoretical discourse lies not simply in the fact that it can be mechanically applied to the description of events, but also in its ability to establish an open dialogue with these. Such an open dialogue always involves negotiating and thus modifying some initial assumptions.

In this study my intention is to explore the particular contribution of Moroccan Arabic (MA), and the cultural code associated with it, to the theoretical discourse on politeness. My focus will be on the particular way MA handles central speech acts such as expressing gratitude, invitations and compliments. However, as I will try to show, the 'unique' treatment of these speech acts uncovers a new way of viewing the act of communicating and of understanding how human beings are involved in this process. To my understanding, politeness is more than a mere strategy to solve the conflicts inherent to social interactions; it is a way of constructing our identity, and the identities of others, in human terms. The issue of how MA deals with certain speech acts leads us, somehow, to rethink the disciplinary adscription of the theoretical discourse on politeness, removing it from an interactional sociolinguistics frame, where it was initially formulated, into the domain of linguistic anthropology, or, simply anthropology.

The dialogue between a theoretical discourse and the empirical field which this discourse describes is articulated here in two



stages. In the first, an intercultural contrast (a theory originally based on English and Anglo-Saxon culture sets against empirical data from MA) allows us to identify specific cases of what concerns a polite behaviour. It is precisely this contrast with the theoretical discourse that leads us to pay a special attention to the aspects of a polite behaviour in MA that might not have been seen as meriting explicit reflection had they not been questioned from outside the culture. Indeed, the contact and contrast with other cultural contours is the only instrument at our disposal to identify singularities of the culture itself. In the second stage, these singularities are re-examined and through this they cease to be loose and discordant pieces of the theoretical discourse, inasmuch as their inherent internal logic now becomes apparent. In this way, the empirical field described becomes a true interlocutor with the theoretical discourse, which must adapt the assumptions and the scope of its proposals if the aim of a universal description is to be achieved. Politeness is definitely a universal phenomenon, so to think about politeness requires a dialogue between complementary visions adopting a transcultural position.

To conclude this brief introduction, it is worth mentioning that the formulation of this type of theory is fed by my personal bicultural experiences, as a person for whom the forging of a style and an identity was the result of a long process of hybridization and reconciliation of cultural codes, a process, of course, which included problems and more than one misunderstanding. Intercultural dialogue has been in my case an inner dialogue, one that people in such circumstances normally keep to themselves.

Through my experience as a native speaker of MA and also my work in the field of pragmatics, I was able to anticipate that the use of the three speech acts chosen for the present study might involve potential pragmatic conflicts in terms of Western communicative expectations. Communicative breakdowns or other problems are thus expected to occur during interactions between Moroccans and, for example, English speakers as a result of the lack of a one-to-one correspondence of how thanks/apologies, invitations and compliments are used and interpreted in the two language communities.

An overview of the sociolinguistic profile of Morocco will now be given, together with a description of the different dialects spoken in this country.

## A sociolinguistic profile of Morocco

Morocco's strategic situation at the cross road between Africa and Europe and its recent history of colonization is the dominant source for the Moroccan rich ethno-linguistic *patrimoine*. Though the original language was Berber and its varieties, today, Moroccan Arabic is the mother tongue of most Moroccans. Most accounts describe Morocco as a multilingual community where the majority of Moroccans speak at least two of the five co-existing languages<sup>1</sup>, namely, Berber, Moroccan Arabic (MA), Classical Arabic (CA), French and Spanish. Berber is the language of the aboriginals of Morocco and of all Northern Africa as well, and the first contact of Moroccans with CA was through the conquest by the Arabs from the east in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D, and through the process of conversion to Islam. CA is today the official language of all Arab countries and it is used in press, in politic activities, in religious ceremonies and in educational programs. CA is the symbol of unity of all Arab countries and a highly esteemed language by Arabs especially Muslims who consider it as sacred for being the language of the Koran, 'the eternal word of God' as well as 'a transcript of our eternal book, sublime and full of wisdom'(Dawood 1975, cit. in Gravel 1979: 83). As a natural evolution of CA, we find Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is used today in all Arab countries as a manifestation of progress and adaptation to the modern world where the coinage and use of technical and scientific terms is a *must*. To express this in terms of Youssi (1977), MSA is the language of argumentation and vulgarization of ideas pertaining to politics, science, medicine, technical procedures, theatre and sport. MSA is exclusively spoken by educated people and in the mass media. MSA shares the same syntax and morphology with CA though they differ with respect to lexis.

1 With the aim of updating the geo-linguistic map of Morocco, it is worth mentioning that the Moroccan community counts with "six" and not "five" languages as it has been claimed up to the date considering the existence of the Hassani language. This language is a variety of Arabic spoken in the area from Layyoun down to the Moroccan border with Mauritania, a territory integrated into the Moroccan political map since 1974. During the Spanish protectorate, this region was referred to as the Occidental Sahara.

The absence of any mention of this language is probably not due to neglect, but rather to its recent integration in the political map of Morocco after its independence from the Spanish protectorate.



Within this process of invasion of the Arabic language and its consequent establishment (to the cost of Berber) as the official language of Morocco, we arrive at the process of colonization of Morocco by both France and Spain. The French settlers used the French language as a policy of expansion meant to annex and gain ground over the Moroccan culture and language. French was introduced and inculcated to Moroccans as the language of civilization and progress, and as such it became the language of instruction at different levels of educational programs from the primary to university levels. All this has guaranteed the diffusion of the French language and has created a prosperous climate for the emergence of a large elite completely assimilated into the French culture and reaching a native-like proficiency in French. Meanwhile, Arabic was reduced to a language taught in Coranic schools known as “M’sid”<sup>2</sup>, which are neither public nor private, and normally situated in/or in the proximities of Mosques and usually run with collective funds and donations, but not by the state. These schools were the only institution where children could learn the Arabic language, and as a secondary level they could go to “M’dersas”<sup>3</sup>, and those who wanted to continue their studies, they were admitted to the University of Karaouiine in Fes.

The impact of the French linguistic invasion is still obvious in the speech behaviour of Moroccans even after independence was achieved. Despite the government attempts of Arabization of the school and the administration, Moroccans still use French or a kind of “Russian salad” language, where French and Arabic are intermingled. This sociolinguistic phenomenon has been the central focus of many studies as a good example of code switching. Right now, French is still used in Moroccan administration so the government is attempting to replace it with Arabic. Nevertheless, the process of Arabization seems to be slow and is a long way from being achieved. However, in the present, French is solely taught as a foreign language and there appears to be a reluctant detachment from the aftermath of the French linguistic and cultural colonialism.

Contrary to French, the Spanish language was introduced gradually and through a longer period of history considering that Me-

2 “M’sid” is a corruption of the Word “Masjid” (CA) <the Mosque> and refers to the schools where the Coran is usually taught to children at an early age. These schools are a kind of nursery schools and they are normally situated in or next to the Mosque.

3 “M’dersa” is another corruption of the Word “Madrassah” (CA) <school>.



lilla fell under the Spanish protectorate as early as 1497. Nevertheless, Spanish could hardly interfere in the linguistic and cultural scene of Morocco. More importantly, the use of the Spanish language never went beyond the northern part of Morocco and the Moroccan Sahara and it never penetrated in the educational or administrative domains as French did. As is the case with French, Spanish today is also learned as a foreign language at the secondary school level.

Within this complicated sociolinguistic panorama, Berber has survived all these invasions and re-invasions taking refuge in the mountains as if waiting for a better social climate to reappear. For decades, Berber was neglected as a language and Berbers were considered Moroccans of “second type”. To speak Berber was synonymous with under-civilization. As an approximation to the linguistic persecution that Berber has experienced as a language and as a culture, we find the case of “Valenciano” in Valencia the capital city of Comunidad Valenciana where those who speak Valenciano were identified as “gent de poble” (in Valenciano) <country people> as a pejorative denomination. Similar to this sociolinguistic infra-evaluation we find in MA the appellative “3robi” <country man> used by Arabic speaking Moroccans to Berbers to denote a lack of civism and culture. However, if we consider the etymology of the word “3robi” I think that the word “3robi” is a corruption of “3arabi” CA meaning someone who speaks Arabic as a pejorative appellative to those who speak Arabic at a time when Berber was the dominant language in Morocco and Arabic was the language of the “invader”. It might also be a corruption of the word “A3rabi” from CA also meaning “country man”. Even the word “Berber” is pejorative in itself, or at least this is how it could be understood granting that Berbers never refer to themselves as Berbers but as “Imazighen” the plural of “Amazigh” <free man> who speaks “Tamazight” i.e.: the Berber language. Tamazight is classified as belonging to the Afro-asiatic branch and descending from the Proto-Afro-Asiatic language. From a linguistic migration theory, and as claimed by historical linguists, Berber is believed to have existed in Eastern Africa 12.000 years ago. However, Berbers today are located principally in Northern Africa and the language represents an estimated population of 36 million Berber speakers distributed in countries all over the world. The most representative country in terms of the density of the Berber population is Morocco (18.980.000) then Alge-



ria (12.800.000). Then, to a lesser degree, Niger (1000.000); also Mali (700.000); Libya (280.000); Mauritania (150.000); Tunisia (130.000); Israel /100.000); and Egypt (20.000).

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After this brief historical overview of the function and the status of the languages that exist in Morocco, we will be concerned in the following paragraph with MA and its varieties and accents. MA is rated as low (L) in a diglossic relation with Modern Standard Arabic, usually considered as high (H) (Ferguson, 1976). However, MA is the mother tongue of Moroccans and it is the most practical and the only means of communication used by most Moroccans<sup>4</sup>. MA is known in Morocco as “Darija” and it has no written form. It is exclusively used as a spoken language. MA shares many properties with the CA to put it as Gravel (1979) and Bentahila (1983) claim, MA and CA exhibit many variations as far as phonology, syntax and morphology are concerned. Despite the historical relation of MA and CA, the origin of MA and the other similar “low” languages spoken in Morocco and in every Arab country in parallel with CA, was a matter of controversy for many linguists. Consequently, three different theories were founded to delimit the origin of these low varieties. The first one situates these varieties as derived from CA and representing a linguistic continuum of CA. The second theory views these varieties as pertaining to a spoken language, which existed side-by-side with the formal and the written CA (Ferguson, 1976). The different Arabic “dialects” which are in use in the different Arab countries<sup>5</sup> are referred to as “Arabic Koiné”. Finally, the third theory states that these low varieties have developed from different Koinés.

From a contrastive point of view, MA exhibits many variations in comparison with CA in the areas of lexis, syntax and phonology. CA phonemes like /ð/, /ð̣/ and /θ/ are actually realized as /d/, /ḍ/ and /t/ and as far as lexis is concerned, the lexical

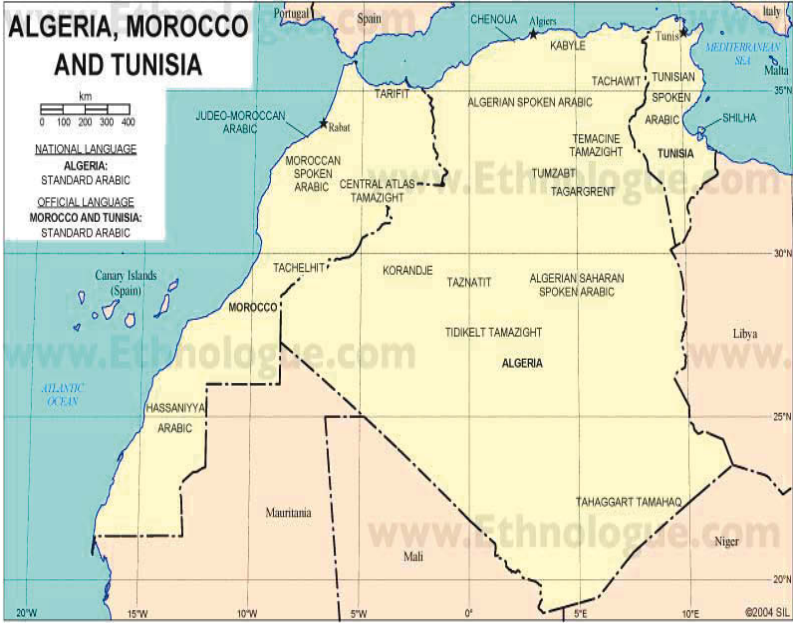
<sup>4</sup> Moroccan Arabic is also spoken by the Berber community. Most Berbers are completely bilingual and are able to use both MA and Berber ambivalently.

<sup>5</sup> Every Arabic country has its own Arabic dialect as illustrated in what follows: Algerian (D), Tunisian (D), Lybian (D), Egyptian (D), Libanese (D), Jordan(d), Sirian (D), Palestinian(D), Sudanese(D), Khaliji (D) (“Khaliji” refers to the Arabic Dialects spoken in the Gulf countries), etc.



repertoire of MA is marked by an exaggerated borrowing from French, Spanish and Berber. In some cases, we find instances where some borrowed words no longer serve the same meaning as in the language they are borrowed from. On the syntactic level, however, MA seems to have a more simplified system of inflection in comparison with CA. This fact endows MA with more freedom in what concerns word order. MA is also void of duality and the feminine plural and case endings are distorted. In terms of tense, the time of the action is not clearly segmented as in English or French (Meziani, 1985: 190). On the contrary, in MA the action is projected as fulfilled or not fulfilled, that is, any action performed at a specific point is an action done in the past of that point, or, contrariwise, any action not completed is considered present. Mainly, accomplished actions are marked by forms used as prefixes of the verb as, for example, /ghadi/ which is used to announce futurity and /rah/ to describe an action in progress. As Meziani (1985: 190) claims: "The MA verb has in and of itself no reference to the temporal relations of the S (speaker). It is concerned rather with the realization of a process or event." Consequently, in MA speakers have recourse to periphrastic forms, i.e.: adverbs of time, to refer to a specific time.

Apparently, MA is identified and defined as the language spoken by all Moroccans, but the geo-linguistic reality is different. Ennaji (1985) and Gravel (1979) stated that MA is composed of five regional dialects, which have common syntax and morphology but with their own distinctive features.



Font: Gordon, Raymond G. (2005).

Starting from the North, we find the Tanji dialect, which is spoken in Tangier. Though it takes its name from Tangier, this dialect is also spoken in Tetouan and Larache. Due to the geographical proximity and the recent history of Spanish colonialism, this dialect is characterized by the integration and use of many Spanish lexical items. Considering the phonological level, Gravel (1979: 91) notes that the Tanji phonological inventory includes a large number of diphthongs. In the north east of Morocco and up to the Morocco-Algerian border, the dialect spoken is Oujdi, namely from Oujda. This dialect is characterized by its similarity to Algerian Arabic rather than to MA as a result of the immediate contact with Algerians and possibly due to the settlement in this area of Algerians who escaped from the war with France in the sixties. In the western and the central parts of Morocco, the dialect spoken is “Casablancais” which is not only found in Casablanca but also in the surrounding rural areas of this city. The most salient feature of this variety is the insertion of the pronoun /tta/ <you> just before any imperative to





give more emphasis to the petition (Gravel, 1979: 90). However, this practice is not common among all “Casablançais” but rather among some uneducated people. In the area of Fès and Rabat we find the Fassi and Rbati dialects respectively. These dialects, as is the case with the Tanji dialect, show a phonological alteration as to the pronunciation of the phoneme /g/ which is realized as /q/ or in some other instances as /ʔ/. Another phonological particularity about the Fassi dialect is the realization of /r/ as a velar instead of an apical flapped sound. Turning to the south of Morocco, we find the Marrakshi dialect, as a linguistic variety spoken not only in Marrakesh, but rather in all the neighbouring areas of this city. The Marrakshi dialect is characterized by the realization of /g/ instead of /q/ which we find in Fassi and Tanji dialects and in CA; or /ʔ/ also found in the mentioned dialects as well as in the Egyptian dialect. Another distinctive phonological aspect of the Marrakshi dialect is the dropping of the velar sound /ġ/ exclusively in the word “bgha” <want>, which is pronounced as /ba/.

In addition to these varieties of MA we consider opportune to mention the existence of other dialect varieties on which few studies have been reported, namely, the Judeo-Moroccan Arabic, possibly, due to the lack of particular location of the Jewish community in a particular region of Morocco or, probably, thanks to the harmonious coexistence and the absence of the exclusion of this community within Morocco. Jews were found in different cities of Morocco especially in some districts called “Mellah” also known as <juderias> in Spanish <Jewish quarter/district> where Jews used to live and where many of their commercial activities (mainly goldsmiths) were concentrated. Jewish Moroccan Arabic is reputed to share with Fassi and Tanji dialects the phonological characteristic of realizing the phoneme /q/ as /ʔ/. Hassani Arabic is also now integrated in the geo-linguistic map of Morocco, following the independence of the Occidental Sahara from the Spanish colonizers and its integration into the Moroccan political map. Hassani Arabic or “Hassanyia” is the language spoken by natives of the geographical area located from Layyoun down to Morocco-Mauritanian border. This linguistic variety stands more as a variety of Arabic in a macro representation of the different varieties of Arabic spoken in the Arabic world than as a variety of MA.