Amazigh in Moroccan Media: An Attitudinal Study

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Abstract

Amazigh has undertaken a remarkable course of renaissance, especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century; in 2001, the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) was established, and in 2003, the language began to be taught in Moroccan primary schools, in 2010, an Amazigh TV channel was launched, and in 2011, the Amazigh language was constitutionalized. The current study sought to investigate Moroccans' attitudes and views on Amazigh's presence in media. A sample of 150 informants was selected to participate in an online questionnaire. Thematic analysis was specifically adopted to examine the survey data. The findings revealed that Moroccans generally have positive attitudes towards the presence of Amazigh in public and electronic media and are fairly satisfied with Amazigh media outlets in particular. Facebook was also viewed to be a fitting alternative to Amazigh's weak institutional presence and use in public life, suggesting that this platform can significantly contribute to the promotion and development of the Amazigh language and culture. The study concludes that there is a shift in Moroccans' attitudes towards Amazigh, given that previous research indicated that many Moroccans tend to hold negative perceptions of Amazigh.

Keywords: Amazigh, media, Moroccans, attitudes, thematic analysis

1. Introduction

Media is a crucial priority sphere of public life. Mass media, in particular, is the key mechanism through which Morocco's national language policy and the processes of Amazigh revitalization can be fundamentally implemented. To gain prestige and reach large audiences, the Amazigh language should be promoted through conventional means of communication, including radio, TV, and the press (Boukous, 2012; Loutfi & Noamane, 2020).

Several political, economic, and logistic factors have hampered the use and dissemination of Amazigh through public media. Belhiah et al. (2020) list a number of these dynamics: the decision-makers' vague vision, the inadequate budget provided to Amazigh media outlets, investing the existing resources in programs with higher advertising profits, the shortage of professional human resources, and the lack of private investment in the Amazigh audiovisual production.

The current study explores Amazigh's presence in various media genres, principally mass media, and social media. It specifically seeks to explore Moroccans' attitudes and stances on Amazigh's position within the Moroccan media map. The study essentially aims to highlight the extent to which Moroccans are satisfied with how Amazigh is treated in the media sector, whether the Amazigh language and culture are celebrated and prioritized as enforced by the state's supreme law, i.e. the constitution, and whether social media, especially Facebook, which this paper argues to be the new reality of the Amazigh cause and which should be fully embraced regardless of its challenges and limitations, could be truly considered an option, a resort, or even a replacement of the arguably weak institutional efforts made to invigorate and ameliorate the social standing of the Amazigh language and culture.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1. Media's Role in Maintaining and Promoting Amazigh

It is through education, administration, and media that the state controls and manipulates cultural memory (Gellner, 1983). Through these institutions, specific policies are designed to keep the status quo. Morocco is a case in point where cultural differences and diversity are an issue of paramount interest. Media and education in particular are viewed as "(the most) important direct agents in linguistic and cultural genocide" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2006, p. 277). The production and consumption of media materials are thus avenues to maintain the Amazigh language and culture and sustain the power of Amazigh's cultural specificity among other possible identities. Mass media can make a language prestigious, improve and increase its communicative areas, indorse mutual understanding of different varieties, and uphold language learning (Arana et al., 2007; Cormack, 2007; Crystal, 2000; Ferguson, 2006; Jones, 2007; Kelly-Holmes, 2001; Moring, 2007).

Historically, Amazigh was deprived of official recognition and denied access to spheres of influence and institutional power due to colonialism, Arabism, and Arabization (Behiah et al., 2020). Moroccan media has promoted particular constructs of nationalism exerting such ideologies. Amazigh has accordingly been marginalized, held as a sheer form of folklore used for advertising and entertainment (Errihani, 2008).

Media should evade uniformity and unidimensional tendencies, and instead seek to create a societal perception that firmly holds the concepts of tolerance, plurality, and citizenship. To conserve and promote Amazigh, Moroccan media should function as a source of pressure so that related language policies are effectively implemented. They should not, at any level, settle for silence or endorse the political views of a specific party. There should be an intensified adoption of programs that valorize and positively represent the linguistic and cultural uniqueness of Amazigh. The latter should not, by all means, be reduced to advantaged domains of influence or be a victim of prejudice and inequity.

2.2. Amazigh's Current State in the Moroccan Media Scene

Nowadays, Amazigh faces fierce competition from Moroccan colloquial Arabic (also called Darija), Arabic, and French. Official statistics show that Darija is the most widely spoken language in Morocco (about 90% of the population), while Amazigh speakers represent roughly 27% of the Moroccan population according to the 2014 national consensus released by the Haut Commissariat au Plan (Belhiah et al., 2020). Compared to the 2004 national consensus, the number of Amazigh speakers is gradually decreasing.

Change in the status of Amazigh began in 1994 when King Hassan II called for the teaching of 'Berber dialects' and the airing of Amazigh news bulletins on RTM, the national public broadcasting channel. Subsequently, King Mohammed VI ensured further concrete reforms in education and media, emphasizing the fact that Amazigh is part and parcel of Morocco's identity and cultural heritage. In 2001, the Royal Institute of the Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) was established, and in 2003 an adapted version of Tifinagh was approved as the official script for writing Amazigh which started to be taught in Moroccan public primary schools in the same year. From 2006 till 2011, Amazigh programs started to be aired on the two primary public TV channels, 2M and Al Oula. However, these two channels did not commit to the public broadcasters' licensing obligations documents providing guidelines and specifications on the use of Amazigh on public TV channels (Hassanoui, 2012). Another significant improvement took place in 2010 when the first Amazigh TV channel, Tamazight, was launched.

Currently, various impediments are hindering Amazigh media advancement. Saib (2013) highlights several obstructions, including the exclusionist pan-Arabism ideology whose followers

control the critical political decisions, and the lack of financial support, resources, and professional staff.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions

To achieve the objectives guiding the present study, three main questions have been formulated:

1. What are the attitudes of Moroccans towards Amazigh's presence in national media?

2. How can Amazigh's public and electronic media experience be described?

3. To what extent is Facebook an effective alternative for promoting the Amazigh language and culture?

3.2. Research Design

The study exerted an exploratory research design, resorting to a primarily qualitative research instrument for data collection, to get critical insights into Moroccans' attitudes, experiences, and views on Amazigh's presence in accessible media outlets. Besides the fact that the nature of the study required this very specific design, the ultimate objective of this piece of research also imposed the adoption of a scheme that facilitates the task of gaining an understanding of the data from the subject's perspective (Palmer & Bolderston, 2006). In this regard, a survey was utilized to provide a comprehensive account of Moroccans' attitudes towards Amazigh's share of Moroccan public media and the possibility of shifting the direction into Facebook as the most widely used social media space to revitalize and promote Amazigh.

3.3. Sampling and Participants

To target an eclectic variety of Moroccans, an online questionnaire was employed. A sample of 150 informants was purposefully selected from all around Morocco. Since the study had exclusively exploratory objectives, no social variables were specifically addressed; two predefined criteria were however taken into consideration: being Moroccan and having access to Facebook. The survey participants were hence chosen based on their close relation to the research topic (Seale, 2012). For more information about the study's participants, look at Table 1.

Table 1. The Respondents' Social Characteristics

Variables	Categories	Percentages
Gender	Male	70,70%
	Female	29,30%
Age	18 or less	2%
	18-25	25,30%
	25-35	61,30%
	35-45	9,30%
	More than 45	2%
Occupation	Employee	64,70%
	Student	22,70%
	Worker	6%
	Others	6,60%
Educational Level	Bachelor degree	64,6%
	Master degree	20,70%
	Doctorate degree	6%
	Baccalaureate	6,7%
	High school degree or less	2,7%
Region of Belonging	Souss-Massa	64,66%
	Marrakech-Safi	12,66%
	Others	22,68%
Ethnolinguistic Background	Amazigh	85,4%
	Arab	9,3%
	Unknown	5,4%
Speakers of Amazigh	Yes	87,3%
	No	12,7%

Table 1 shows that the great majority of the study sample were males, youths between the ages of 18 and 35, employees, holders of higher education degrees, belonging mostly to the Souss-Massa region, with Amazigh background, and speaking Amazigh. Ostensibly, the reported traits indicate that the collected data were provided by a category of the population with sufficient knowledge and awareness of the subject matter.

3.4. The Research Instrument

The tool adopted for collecting data for this study was an online questionnaire. The reason for selecting this instrument was the fact that the study sought to primarily gain exploratory data. An online survey was hence deemed applicable since it would simplify the process of obtaining meaningful and copious information from the participants' own knowledge and standpoints. The questionnaire was administered in two versions, Arabic and English. But most of the respondents chose Arabic.

In addition to the demographic information, the survey comprised three general items, namely:

1) How do you evaluate the presence of Amazigh in the Moroccan national media?
2) What is your view on the experience of Moroccan audiovisual and electronic media?
3) Social networking websites, especially Facebook, can be considered an effective alternative for promoting and revitalizing Amazigh.

3.5. Data Analysis

Since the researcher intended to understand the attitudes, experiences, and thoughts of Moroccans on Amazigh's status in media, thematic analysis was viewed as the most fitting method. It was also chosen given the fact that it permits the identification, analysis, and reporting of recurrent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was therefore opted for to find common or shared meanings within the survey's responses. More importantly, this analytical scheme was preferred because it would assist in presenting the data as primarily expressed by the research participants without any redundant or unnecessary interpretations of the final findings.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Amazigh in the Moroccan National and Electronic Media

Almost two thirds (59, 66%) of the overall sample positively evaluated Moroccan national media (look at Fig. 1).
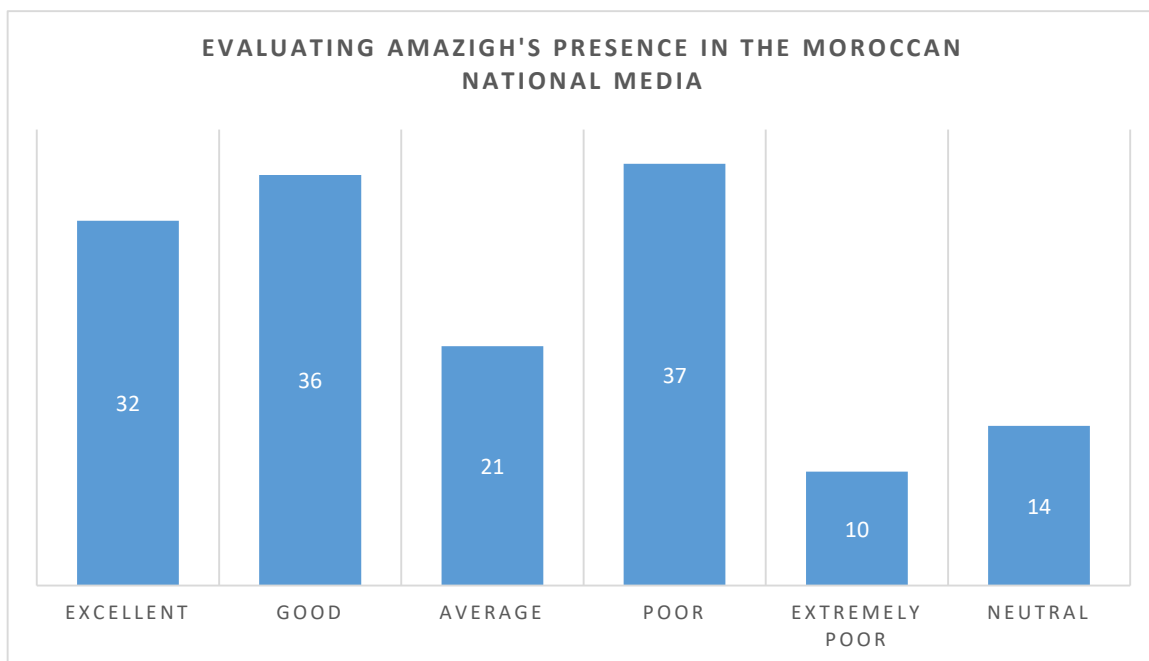
EVALUATING AMAZIGH'S PRESENCE IN THE MOROCCAN NATIONAL MEDIA

32	36	21	37	10	14
EXCELLENT	GOOD	AVERAGE	POOR	EXTREMELY POOR	NEUTRAL

Figure 1. Moroccans' Perceptions of Amazigh in the Moroccan National Media

Figure 1 shows that the majority of respondents were satisfied with Amazigh's presence in public media. This finding is consistent with Reino's (2007) finding which confirms that indeed Moroccans have a positive attitude towards the presence of Amazigh in the national mainstream media. It is probably the television programs of the TV channel Tamazight which have recently been followed by great masses that gave a surge of positivity and approval to these participants. Yet, there was no such great discrepancy between Moroccans' positive and negative evaluations of the matter; a third of the participants (31, 33%) were not quite pleased with the relevant presence. The reason for this discontent maybe stems from the infrequent appearance of Amazigh in media, especially 2M, Al-Oula, and Al-Maghribia TV channels. This finding strongly relates to Hassnaoui's (2012) decisive remarks concerning these outlets' commitment to the guidelines and specifications pertinent to the use of Amazigh in such public media. This could be the rationale behind the displeasure felt by this category of participants. The respondents' frustration may also be due to the fact that most media outlets treat Amazigh as mere folklore. In this respect, Errihani (2008) states that the Amazigh language and culture "are basically used as a living museum whose only role is to attract foreign tourism, so much so that the term 'folklore' has come to be identified with Berber" (p. 424).

As to the group of informants who chose to be neutral, they were likely the same people who claimed to be Arabs; hence, it is highly probable that they did not follow Amazigh programs on the Moroccan national media.

Thematic analysis of the sample's opinions on the long experience of Amazigh audiovisual and electronic media in particular revealed two poles, one with a positive view, and another holding a negative perspective. Table 2 epitomizes the evidence provided by each group to support its description.

Table 2. Opinions on the Experience of the Amazigh Audiovisual and Electronic Media

Category	Themes	Frequency
Good	Promoting the Amazigh language and culture	**83**
Not good	Limited presence of Amazigh	
	Not preserving the distinctiveness of Amazigh	**58**
	The need for the private sector	
	Representing an unintelligible Amazigh	
Neutral		**9**

Most of the survey respondents regarded the related experience as good. They emphasized the key role the concerned media play in "disseminating and promoting the Amazigh language and culture" (extract 37, item 11).

As displayed in Table 1, various aspects were, on the other hand, indicated by the second category, showing the failure of the evaluated experience. Among these points was the humble presence of the Amazigh language in the pertinent media. Another point was the misrepresentation of the Amazigh culture "by copying and spreading a culture that is not Amazigh at all" (extract 45, item 11). Seemingly, the reference was to the exploitation of Amazigh for commercial gains which causes substantial alterations in certain Amazigh cultural forms. It is for this reason that one of the participants claimed that the Amazigh media "is required to preserve the Amazigh cultural individuality" (extract 50, item 11).

The disgruntled informants also stressed the fact that Amazigh language revitalization and development demand a powerfully parallel 'private sector' (extract 64, item 11). Still, the very language employed in the related media was among the raised issues. It was described as 'Arabized' (extract 125, item 11), since it is a mixture of Amazigh and Arabic, and "unintelligible" (extract 126, item 11), as it is distinct from the language spoken by the Amazigh people. Discontent was also expressed by this set of participants regarding the Amazigh media's lack of "diversification of TV programs" (extract 84, item 11).

A significant observation associated with the content aired especially on the Tamazight channel was shared. Remarkably, it was accentuated that the Amazigh media "is only restricted to

Tarifit" (extract 21, item 11). The other Amazigh varieties, i.e. Tashelhite and Tamazight, are therefore less used. This appears to have instigated an immense attitudinal impact on the channel's followers. This issue of unintelligibility must then be seriously addressed. However, it is perhaps the short time extent allocated to Tamazight and the difficulty of having programs equally produced in the three varieties that have resulted in focusing on Tarifit in particular. It could yet be a choice leaden with ideological intents; favoring one variety over the others may serve the interests of specific political groups or lobbies.

4.2. Amazigh on Facebook

The Amazigh language and culture are not only present in mainstream media but also on social media platforms. One of which is Facebook, the largest social networking website nowadays. The study hence sought to explore Moroccans' perspectives on Amazigh's presence on Facebook, aiming to discover whether or not this virtual space could be considered an effective alternative for revitalizing and advancing Amazigh. Interestingly, the vast majority of the survey participants (80, 66%, look at Figure 2) ensured the effectiveness of this tool in promoting Amazigh.
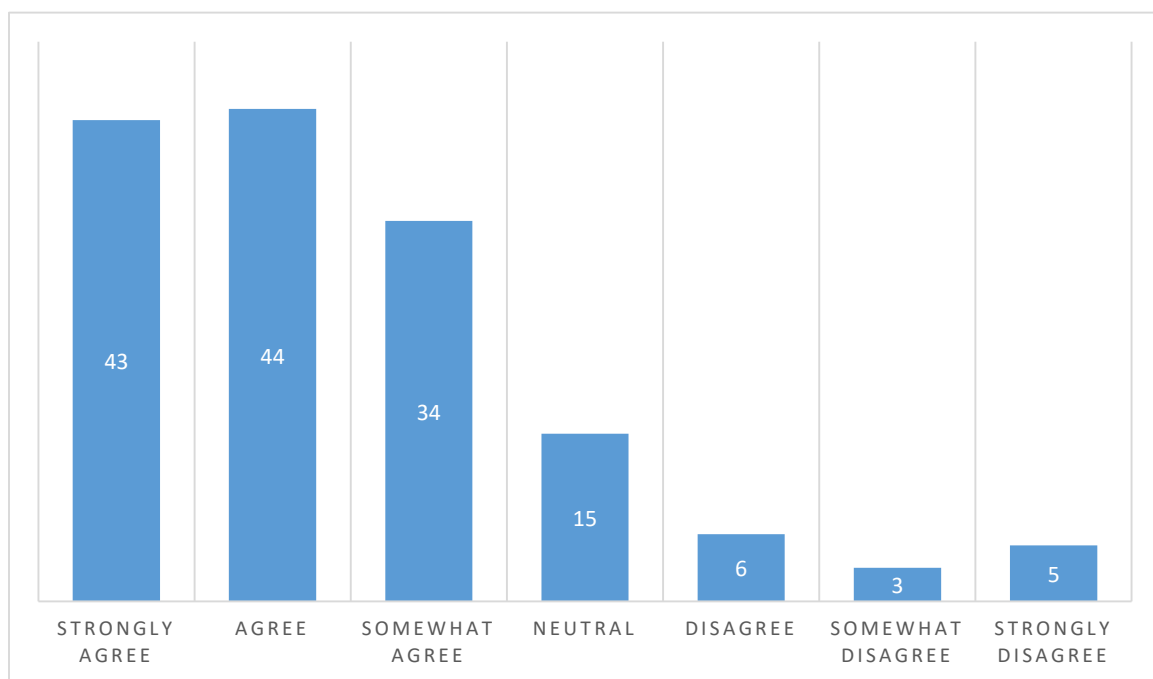

Figure 2. Facebook's Effectiveness in Promoting Amazigh

The respondents are likely aware of the positive effects Facebook has on any language; it could be a space wherein Amazigh (Tifinagh) can be learned, and it provides forums whereby diverse Amazigh cultural elements could be presented, promoted, and disseminated both locally and globally, as well as it allows for discussions on various subjects related to the Amazigh issue,

especially education, and history. Facebook can thus be a successful alternative to the relatively inadequate institutional efforts being made to revive and improve Amazigh.

Nevertheless, the question that is raised in this context is whether Facebook's nature as an unorganized, uncontrolled, and 'unreliable' source of information can indeed be treated with such attention and consideration. As an attempt to get back at this query, it is safe to say that Facebook is above all a direct reality that cannot be escaped; people consume and produce massive volumes of content on this platform. The whole world is now connected through Facebook. It is hence, by dint of this concrete fact, unreasonable to disregard the power of this social networking site. Yet, it is a given that this platform presents a wide array of opportunities for minority and minoritized languages such as Amazigh. It solely depends on the speakers and people interested in the language to properly employ the provided tools to make a change in the status of Amazigh, diminishing or even abolishing the stereotypes, stigmata, and unfavorable attitudes a large group of people has towards Amazigh, raise Moroccans' awareness of the irreducible character of this historically deeply-rooted identity, publicly discuss issues linked to Amazigh's advancement, teach Tifinagh, share stories and histories of the Amazigh civilization, bring up the social and economic concerns of Amazigh-speaking areas, and establish a firm network that brings together different strata of the Moroccan Amazigh community.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore Moroccans' perceptions and perspectives on the presence of Amazigh in public media and on social networking sites, precisely Facebook. Thematic analysis of 150 informants' responses to an online questionnaire shows that Moroccans are enormously contented with the presence of Amazigh in the national public media and on Facebook as well. The Amazigh media itself is held with so much positivity and fulfillment. The study, therefore, illustrates that there is a shift in attitudes towards Amazigh's presence in media; previous studies revealed that Moroccans, including Imazighen (plural of Amazigh) themselves, hold negative attitudes towards Amazigh, especially in the fundamental domains of public life (Errihani, 2006; Errihani, 2008; Marley, 2004).

Although the study confirms that Moroccans' attitudes towards Amazigh in media are generally positive, there is still a massive group of people who view Amazigh's presence in public and electronic media as insignificant and the Amazigh media experience as a failure. The reasons behind this disappointment and negativity are varied, including the media's endeavors to distort the symbols of the Amazigh identity, disrespect of Amazigh's cultural specificities, and use of an incomprehensible Amazigh media language, which adopts Tarifit more often than not, compared to the other linguistic variants (Tashelhit and Tamazight).

As to Facebook as an alternative to Amazigh's institutional presence, the results substantiate this platform's usefulness in promoting Amazigh. Moroccans can use Tifinagh and discuss a wide variety of Amazigh-related issues. This virtual social space is therefore viewed as beneficial and constructive to the Amazigh struggle for revival and advancement.

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