

# Language Varieties in the Maghreb

## A Brief Historical Overview

France began colonizing North Africa for political, strategic and cultural reasons. Their conquest over North Africa began in 1832 when they acquired Algeria as a protectorate. From there they gained Tunisia in 1881 and Morocco in 1912. To gain power and influence in the region, France used a “divide and conquer” strategy and exploited ethnic tensions between the Berber population and the Arabs. This has created lasting tensions between the two groups with Berbers continuously being looked down upon. French as a language began being heavily implemented as a result of this. In contrast, to other colonial empires such as British Imperial Policy which focused heavily on othering people. French colonial policy taught the “assimilation policy” which claimed that by learning the French language and french cultural customs you could eventually become French, gaining certain rights and privileges. There would be points in France’s colonial history where the segregation model would be favored over assimilation but, it was clear that using French language and culture was preferred and would grant you privileges no matter what.

## High Variety Settings in North Africa V.S. Low Vairiety Settings

Categories of use	High	Low
Sermons in church or mosque	x	
Instructions to servants, waiters, workers, clerks		x
Personal letters	x	
Speeches in parliaments, political speech	x	
University lectures	x	
Conversations with family, friends, colleagues		x
News broadcasts	x	
Radio soap operas		x
Newspaper editorials, news stories, photo captions	x	
Political cartoon captions		x
Poetry	x	
Folk literature		x

## What are Language Varieties? Language Diversity in North Africa

Language Varieties, in sociolinguistic terms, deal with the varying languages, dialects, clusters, styles or other forms of a language within a specific region. In North Africa, Arabic is the most commonly spoken language. The language has history in the region dating back over one thousand years. There are many different forms of Arabic depending on where you are in North Africa. Dialects are mainly separated by country but, there are even different dialects within certain countries. For example Moroccan Dialect is referred to as Darija. Maghrebi Arabic is seen in multiple Arab countries including Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. With influences directly relating to Italian, French and Berber. Though, Arabic is the most common language in the region there are many other languages with prominence in North Africa as well. A great example of this is French. French has been in the region since the 17th century but, it grew to prominence in the 19th century due to French colonialism. Colonialism in North Africa still affects the way different Language varieties are viewed in the region to this day. Another example of an Indigenous language variety is Tamazight spoken by the Amazigh people also known as Berber. Tamazight dates back to the 4 century B.C., the name “berber” for the language and the people came from Ancient Greek explorers who came up with the name for the language from the Greek Word “Barbaros” which translates to barbarians. This is now seen as offensive. Today, Amazigh people are considered a distinct ethnic group with the majority of them residing in Morocco and Algeria.

## How are different Language Varieties viewed today?

As we have established there is an extremely diverse language landscape in North Africa, with Morocco being the most diverse of all with Spanish, French, Amazigh and Arab influence. Due to a long history of colonialism and conflict in the region, different languages or variations of the same language are viewed differently. While, French is not an official language in Maghreb countries its influence is still very prominent. It is seen as a language of the educated, it is used in Universities, political spaces and for business. It is considered a High Variety language. Within, the Arabic language as stated there are many different varieties. Modern Standard Arabic is the High Variety. It is used to teach Arabic as opposed to the many different dialects used by Arabic speakers all over the world. It is used in similar spaces to French for communication. Dialects like Moroccan Darija, are considered Low Variety only being spoken in casual settings without much impact. Another example of a language considered Low Variety is Tamazight. Tamazight has always been looked down upon in the region by Arabs. Many Amazigh people are afraid to claim being Amazigh because they are looked down upon within society. So this language is hardly ever seen in political, economic, or religious spaces. Colonization in the region has left a lasting impact on the way language in these areas are perceived, and the spaces they are used in. Many speakers in these areas apply code switching depending on where they are and who they are talking to, to fit societal norms.

