

## Chapter Four: Berber

### Introduction

This chapter is concerned with Berber, its history, sociology, population, and dialectal variation. It deals with the linguistic properties, social functions and domains of use of Berber. Following the demands of the Berber academics, who have been undertaking ample research on the language and its culture since the 1960s, and the struggle of Berber NGOs for the revitalisation of their language, Berber has recently been officially recognised as a basic component of Moroccan (North African) culture. Efforts have been made to promote it to a standard language, hence the current endeavours to codify and standardise it, before its introduction in the educational system.

Historically, the word “Berber” has a pejorative (derogatory) meaning; it is etymologically derived from Latin “barbaros”, which the Greek first used to name anybody who was a foreigner or had a different language and culture. It is for this reason that many Berber people and intellectuals prefer to use the Berber term *Amazigh* or *Tamazight*, which refers at the same time to the language and identity of Berbers. In this chapter, however, I will retain the term “Berber” because (i) it is commonly used in the Anglo-Saxon and French circles, (ii) it is today employed neutrally without the pejorative connotation, (iii) the term “Berber” is so general that it covers all the Berber dialects that are spoken inside and outside Morocco (see Boukous 1995, Sadiqi 1997b).

The majority of Berber speakers (55%) are bilingual since they also speak Moroccan Arabic. Most of the Berber monolinguals are children or old people living on the Rif and Atlas mountains or in the desert (see Abbassi 1977). Bilinguals learn Moroccan Arabic as a result of schooling, migration, contact with the media and contact with the administration. Because of the immense impact of rural exodus, many intellectuals fear Berber language shift or regression (see Ennaji 1991, Sadiqi 1997b, Boukous 1997).

As most rural Berber children are monolingual, they feel ill at ease when they first attend primary school because their teachers usually speak Moroccan and Standard Arabic but not Berber. School is a challenge because Berber-speaking children have to learn two new languages (Arabic and French) together with other school subjects. Thus, for Berber native speakers, multilingualism and multiculturalism are the norm for the rest of their lives.

The sociology of Berber language and culture, namely its history, the nature of its major population groups, and the variation of the dialects are of paramount importance in order to understand the evolution of the language

and the concerns of its native speakers. This is the focus of the following section.

### **The Sociology of Berber**

The origin of Berber goes back thousands of years. There are three major hypotheses about the origin of the Berber language. The first hypothesis assumes that Berber stems from ancient Egyptian. The second stipulates that it belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language family. The third hypothesis affiliates Berber to Indo-European and Amerindian languages. However, the most plausible theory is to state that Berber is an Afro-Asiatic language, which is mainly spoken in the north of the Great Sahara and in North-West Africa. Berber is the mother tongue of the first inhabitants of North Africa. It is spoken in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mauritania, Canary Islands, Mali, Niger, and Chad. It has been influenced chiefly by Arabic and African languages like Chadic, Kushitic, and Wolof.

Four major population groups may be distinguished. The first population group is in Morocco, where the Berber-speaking population totals about 15 million people. The second group is represented by Algeria, in which more than 6 million people speak Berber. Third, the Berber population in Libya and the Tuareg populations in the sub-Saharan countries, namely Mali and Niger are estimated to be about 1 million people. Fourth, there exist approximately 140,000 Berber speaking people scattered in isolated areas in Siwa (Egypt, about 30 000), Tunisia (nearly 100 000) and Mauritania (about 10 000). The regions where Berber is spoken are discontinuous, as they are usually surrounded by populations speaking other languages like Arabic. Berber populations are concentrated in mountainous regions whose isolation partially accounts for the incomplete penetration of Arabic (cf. Chaker 1983, Mustapha 1993 and Sadiqi 1997b, Berger 2002).

Thus, it is in Morocco that the Berber-speaking population is most important, followed by Algeria. The above estimates are only tentative, as exact figures are impossible to provide given that the previous censuses in Morocco and in Algeria did not take into account the linguistic situation.

Moroccan Arabic is the second language of most Berber speakers. They learn it and speak it in informal settings, i.e., at home, in the market, or in the street. By contrast, Moroccan Arabic native speakers do not normally learn or know Berber, unless they live in a Berber-speaking community. Thus, the majority of Berberophones are ipso facto bilingual or multilingual.

Today, the proportion of monolingual Berberophones has stagnated because of rural exodus and Arabisation. According to Abbassi (1977), 45% of Berberophones are monolingual. They are considered illiterate because