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ALEXANDER BORG, PAUL WEXLER

OTTO HARRASSOWITZ WIESBADEN
HASTA LA MUJERRA! AND OTHER INSTANCES OF PLAYFUL LANGUAGE MIXING IN MOROCCO

The study of language mixing (code-switching, loanword adaptation, etc.) in Morocco is particularly difficult because of the number of successive or simultaneous source languages involved, and because of the confluence of variant adaptations of the same foreign items originating in different times and places. In addition to a number of old borrowings from Berber languages and early Mediterranean vocabulary, within the last century the following developments have occurred: prior to serious colonial penetration some borrowings from southern Romance languages, chiefly Spanish, were entering coastal Moroccan Arabic dialects and trickling into the interior; with the Protectorate (a partial colonial structure) beginning in 1912, Spanish influence intensified in the north (Tangiers, Tetuan) while French influence became important in the Atlantic coast (Casablanca, Rabat-Salé) and in the cities of the fertile central plains (Meknès, Fès); after Independence (1956), the expansion of educational institutions and of public media resulted in an appreciable post-colonial propagation of French (but not Spanish). German and English have played far more minor roles, but recently the latter has begun to catch on and a number of slang terms from English have become established, especially among students.

Classical Arabic (including Modern Literary Arabic), which has always been an influence on Moroccan Arabic in the domains of Islam, (Islamic) law, and the government bureaucracy, is currently gaining in importance because of a gradual policy of Arabization, whereby French is being eased out of schools and other formal contexts. The present article will, however, focus exclusively on European borrowings.¹

¹ The full report of my work to date on language mixing in Morocco is From Code-Switching to Borrowing: Case Study of Moroccan Arabic, being the final report of a project funded by the National Science Foundation and now pending with a publisher. This monograph involves a corpus of about 1000 European borrowings (most with further variants and derivatives) as well as a representative sample of Classical Arabic terms.
An example of a relatively early Romance borrowing is the word for ‘(nonreligious, private) celebration’, for which attested variants are /fišta/, /fišta/, /fišta/, /fišta/, /fišta/, and /fbišta/. Although we cannot recover precise diffusional routes, it is likely that this item came to Morocco via the lingua franca Sabir (formerly used especially in Algiers) in the nineteenth century, perhaps being spread further in Morocco with the arrival after 1912 of French colonial officers who knew Algerian Arabic, and (in northern Morocco) overlain by colonial and postcolonial Spanish influence. The etymology, of course, Sp fiesta, Italian festa, and perhaps other southern Romance cognates; the form /fbišta/ is a recent reshaping directly based on Spanish. The proliferation of phonological variants of this Moroccan Arabic borrowing is entirely typical.

A more problematic borrowing is /antiris/ ‘interest (on loan)’. This can only be explained as a hybrid involving an earlier borrowing */intiris/ from Sp interés, subsequently partly reshaped under the influence of Fr intérêt, since Fr “in” (phonetic [i̯]) is borrowed as MA /ān/ (cf. /kwansa/ ‘to collide [with]’ < coinage). Indeed, /intiris/ is recorded in some dialects from the Atlantic coast cities Rabat and Casablanca, apparently as an obsolescent variant. There are an appreciable number of such hybrid forms involving Spanish and French crossing in particular.

The examples just given, despite having multiple sources and showing multiple attested variants, involve relatively straightforward historical linguistic processes. Moroccan Arabic speakers, often with just a smattering of French or Spanish, attempt to adapt words from these sources as best they can, facing important obstacles in the form of great differences between Romance and Moroccan Arabic in phonetics, morphologically regulated canonical shape patterns, etc. Each important item is “borrowed” many times in different locations and in different periods. French-Moroccan Arabic bilinguals now prefer to reborrow the same French terms in shapes closer to the French prototype, so variant forms have social as well as geographical bases, and as with /antiris/ this “reborrowing” may really produce (unintentionally) a French-Spanish hybrid.

In such instances, it is really only the historical linguist who can (partially) recover the complex history of the form, which is extrapolated from collecting geographical and sociolectal variants, examining linguistic publications from the colonial or precolonial periods, and identifying the

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2. Abbreviations of language names used with examples are: Fr—French, MA—Moroccan Arabic, Sp—Spanish.
ETYMON OR ETYMA. HOWEVER, THERE IS ALSO A SET OF (MOSTLY RECENT) BORROWINGS, FOUND CHIEFLY IN SLANG, WHICH CAN ONLY BE THE PRODUCT OF SOPHISTICATED LINGUISTIC PLAY. HAVING BEEN INVENTED BY SOME UNKNOWN VIRTUOSO, THEY HAVE SPREAD THROUGH SLANG NETWORKS AND ARE NOW USED, OFTEN BY PERSONS WHO HAVE NO IDEA OF THE WORD PLAY INVOLVED.


A CLASS OF EXAMPLES INVOLVING DERIVATIONAL ENLARGEMENT IS A TYPE WITH SUFFIX /-man/ (< ENGLISH -MAN AS IN POLICEMAN, FIREMAN). SPEAKERS WHO USE THIS FORMATION CAN ADD /-man/ TO ANY APPROPRIATE NOUN, BUT THERE IS ALSO AT LEAST ONE CASE OF A PHONOLOGICAL BLEND: /zumzum/– ‘brainy fellow’ FROM /zumzuma/ ‘brainy fellow’ (also ‘top of head’).

ONE STRIKINGLY INGENIOUS EXAMPLE OF PLAYFUL ADAPTATION IS THE EXPRESSION /ast la muxrta/ ‘some other time, not now’, USED IN SLANG TO DEFER A TASK UNTIL SOME OTHER OCCASION. NONE OF THE MORPHEMES OCCURS IN NATIVE MOROCCAN ARABIC, AND THE ENTIRE PHRASE LOOKS LIKE A DIRECT BORROWING FROM PUTATIVE SP *HASTA LA MUJER. IN REALITY, SPANISH DOES HAVE EXPRESSIONS LIKE HASTA LA VISTA ‘UNTIL THE SIGHT’ AND HASTA LA PRÒXIMA ‘UNTIL THE NEXT (TIME)’, USED AS ‘SEE YOU LATER!’ EXPRESSIONS. HOWEVER, /muxrta/ COULD ONLY MATCH SP MUJER ‘WOMAN’ (THE MOROCCAN ARABIC FORM WOULDN'T HAVE TO INVOLVE ADDITION OF THE FEMININE SINGULAR SUFFIX /-a/ AND DOUBLING OF SP R TO /rr/, WHICH ARE SOMEWHAT IRREGULAR BUT NOT OFF-THE-WALL DEVELOPMENTS). ALTHOUGH PERHAPS PHONOLOGICALLY POSSIBLE, SP HASTA LA MUJER ‘UNTIL THE WOMAN’ IS AN AWKWARD EXPRESSION, AND IN ANY EVENT THE SENSE OF THE MOROCCAN ARABIC PHRASE (‘NOT NOW, SOME OTHER TIME’) HAS ONLY A TENUOUS SEMANTIC CONNECTION WITH WOMANHOOD.

IN FACT, /ast la muxrta/ IS A PARTICULARLY INTERESTING HYBRID FORM IN WHICH MA /mra x’ra/ (REGIONAL VARIANT /mra uxa/ ‘OTHER TIME’ IS THE MISSING LINK. THE FULL EXPRESSION WOULD BE /bita l-mra x’ra/ ‘UNTIL ANOTHER TIME’. THE HYBRID EXPRESSION BEGINS WITH SP HASTA LA, AND CONCLUDES WITH A
form /muxirra/ which has (roughly) the sense of MA /mura x'ra/ but is partly based on Sp mujer augmented by means of the feminine ending transferred from /mura/. In effect, /muxirra/ has approximately the same set of phonemes as /mura x'ra/ (with /u/ corresponding to the labialization feature in /x'/) but with the order of these phonemes scrambled under the influence of Sp mujer. It is obvious that /as'a la muxirra/ was concocted by some individual as a deliberate word play, rather than being the result of more normal borrowing processes.