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Emotional expression and linguistic identity in a multilingual Morocco

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Abstract. This study explores the sociolinguistic phenomenon of emotional expression in foreign languages among Moroccan speakers, with a particular focus on the shift away from Darija in emotionally charged communication. Drawing on qualitative data collected through a structured questionnaire, the analysis centers on 64 open-ended responses to three key questions concerning the preference for foreign languages, emotional change across languages, and future linguistic tendencies in Morocco. Thematic coding of the responses reveals several recurring patterns: the perceived lexical richness and expressiveness of English and French, the emotional comfort and detachment offered by non-native languages, and the influence of globalized media and multilingual educational systems. Additionally, the study highlights a growing sociocultural reorientation among Moroccan youth, with foreign languages often seen as more prestigious or better suited to expressing emotionally charged discourse. While some responses indicate a concern about the marginalization of local languages, others foresee a hybrid or multilingual future in which Darija coexists with global linguistic trends. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of language, identity, and emotional expression in multilingual societies and open space for further research on language prestige, emotional fluency, and cultural affiliation in contemporary Morocco.

Key words: Darija, foreign languages, code-switching, multilingualism, language shift, translanguaging

Conflict of interest. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Речевая экспрессия и языковая идентичность в многоязычном Марокко

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Аннотация. С позиций социолингвистики исследовано использование иностранных языков вместо марокканского диалекта арабского языка (дарижа) в эмоционально окрашенной коммуникации. Материалом исследования послужили результаты анкетирования, в рамках которого участникам было предложено ответить на 3 открытых вопроса, касающихся предпочтения иностранных языков, изменения эмоционального восприятия в разных языках и будущих языковых тенденций в Марокко. Анализ 64 полученных ответов позволил выделить среди причин переключения кода осязаемое богатство лексики и выразительность английского и французского языков; ощущение комфорта и дистанцированности от предмета речи при употреблении иностранных слов; влияние СМИ и многоязычных образовательных ресурсов. Кроме того, подчеркнут актуальный социокультурный феномен, характерный для марокканской молодежи, в речи которой все чаще встречаются выражения на иностранных языках, выступающие маркерами престижа или средством выражения эмоций. В то время как некоторые ответы указывают на обеспокоенность по поводу маргинализации местных языков, другие предсказывают гибридное или многоязычное будущее, в котором за дарижа будут закреплены определенные сферы его употребления в рамках глобальных языковых тенденций. Результаты исследования способствуют более глубокому пониманию языка, идентичности и речевой экспрессии в многоязычных обществах и открывают пространство для дальнейшего изучения вопросов престижа языка, эмоциональной грамотности и культурной принадлежности в современном Марокко.

Ключевые слова: дарижа, иностранный язык, переключение кода, мультилингвизм, переключение языка, транслингвальность

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Introduction

Language is not only a system of communication but also a tool for expressing inner emotional states, cultural belonging, and personal identity. In multilingual societies, language choice in emotional contexts often reflects deeper sociolinguistic

dynamics. Morocco represents a particularly rich environment for exploring such dynamics due to its complex linguistic landscape, where Moroccan Arabic (Darija), Amazigh, French, English, and other languages coexist and intersect across domains of daily life (Almadanat, Almadanat, 2024).

In recent years, an observable tendency has emerged: many Moroccans, especially younger generations, increasingly resort to foreign languages — primarily French and English — when articulating emotions. This phenomenon raises important questions about the perceived expressive limitations of Darija, the role of language prestige, and the cultural shifts brought on by globalization, media, and education. The preference for foreign languages in emotional expression may reflect not only lexical availability but also affective distancing, sociocultural reorientation, and identity positioning (Pavlenko, 2012; Barker, Bialystok, 2019).

While previous research in sociolinguistics has explored code-switching, diglossia, and multilingual practices in Morocco, the specific question of why Moroccans express emotions more readily in foreign languages than in Darija remains underexamined. This study addresses this gap by analyzing open-ended responses from Moroccan participants to three key questions about language and emotional expression. The goal is to uncover the underlying linguistic and sociocultural motivations behind this preference and to assess how these tendencies may evolve among future generations.

This study is based on a qualitative approach involving the collection and thematic analysis of responses to a structural questionnaire. It was designed to examine linguistic preferences in emotional expression, with a particular focus on attitudes toward the use of Darija compared to foreign languages such as French and English.

The dataset consists of 64 open-ended answers provided by Moroccan participants aged 18 to 30. The gender distribution included approximately 63% female and 37% male respondents. In terms of educational background, the majority held or were pursuing higher education degrees, with over 60% enrolled in master's programs. Most participants reported Darija as their primary language for daily communication (84%), while French and English were the most mastered foreign languages (98% and 96% respectively). The native language distribution also reflected this multilingual environment, with Darija and Arabic dominating, alongside smaller representations of Amazigh and French.

The questionnaire included three key open questions:

1. Whether respondents had ever felt that a foreign language allowed them to express something they could not in Darija, and why.
2. Whether their manner of expressing emotions changes depending on the language, and how.
3. Whether they believe future generations in Morocco will increasingly use foreign languages to express emotions, and why or why not.

A thematic coding methodology was applied to classify and interpret the responses. Codes were developed inductively based on recurring patterns in the data and grouped

into broader thematic categories, such as *lexical richness*, *emotional detachment*, *media influence*, *language prestige*, and *cultural identity shift*. Each response was assigned to one or more thematic categories depending on its content.

For this study, only responses that directly supported the investigated linguistic phenomenon — namely, the use of foreign languages for emotional expression — were selected for thematic analysis. Negative or non-substantiated responses (e.g., simple negations or affirmative answers without justification) were excluded, as the aim was not to quantify general agreement but to identify and interpret recurring linguistic and sociocultural motivations.

While not all participants answered affirmatively to each question, the analysis focused exclusively on responses that explicitly supported the phenomenon under investigation. This selective approach enabled a more in-depth thematic interpretation of the linguistic and sociocultural motivations underlying the emotional use of foreign languages. Thematic coding revealed a set of recurring categories across the three open-questions. The findings are presented by question and supported by frequency tables and illustrative examples that highlight core discursive tendencies. The study seeks to answer the following research question: What sociolinguistic, cultural, and emotional factors underlie Moroccan youth's preference for using foreign languages — particularly French and English — when expressing emotions, rather than their native Darija?

The aim of the research is to identify and analyze the sociolinguistic, psychological, and cultural factors that drive the preference among Moroccan youth to use foreign languages (French and English) over their native Darija for expressing emotions, and to assess the potential consequences of this trend for linguistic identity and the future linguistic landscape of Morocco.

Perceived expressive limitations of Darija (Question 1)

Participants were asked whether they ever had ever felt that a foreign language enabled them to express something they could not articulate in Darija, and to explain why. Among the 26 responses analyzed, six thematic categories were identified (Table 1).

Table 1

Thematic Categories for Question 1: Expressive Limitations of Darija

Category	Frequency	Description
Lexical availability / efficiency	8	Foreign languages were perceived as offering richer or more precise emotional vocabulary
Emotional distance / comfort	8	Participants expressed a sense of emotional detachment or ease when using non-native languages

Ending tabl. 1

Category	Frequency	Description
Cultural / social inhibition	6	Cultural norms were perceived as restricting emotional openness in Darija
Code-switching as strategy	5	Switching to foreign languages was used for fluency or cognitive comfort
Style / Prestige	5	English and French were viewed as more sophisticated or socially appropriate
Media influence / exposure	3	Participants cited emotional vocabulary internalized through films, books, or digital media

Source: compiled by Y. Nisrine.

Emotional variation across languages (Question 2)

The second question focused on whether participants experienced a shift in their emotional expression when changing languages. Among the 13 responses, five key themes emerged (Table 2).

Table 2

Thematic Categories for Question 2: Emotional Variation Across Languages

Category	Frequency	Description
Emotional detachment / comfort	5	Certain languages feel emotionally safer, reduce shyness, or create distance from emotionally charged expression
Emotional intensity variation	5	Expression of emotions varies in strength or directness depending on the language
Lexical or stylistic shift	5	Differences in vocabulary, expressive range, or stylistic possibilities across languages
Personality or behavior shift	3	Participants report feeling like a different person or adopting new behavioral traits
Cultural norms of expression	2	Cultural expectations shape how emotions are verbalized across languages

Source: compiled by Y. Nisrine.

Projected language preferences of future generations (Question 3)

Participants were asked whether they believed future generations in Morocco would increasingly rely on foreign languages to express emotions. Among the 25 responses, six categories were identified (Table 3).

Table 3

**Thematic Categories for Question 3:
Projected Language Preferences for Future Generations**

Category	Frequency	Description
Media and global cultural exposure	10	Digital and transnational cultural were seen as key forces shaping emotional
Prestige and linguistic fashionability	6	Foreign languages, particularly English, were viewed as trendy, elegant, or modern
Lexical richness and expressive range	4	Participants believed foreign languages allowed for more precise emotional communication
Educational system influence	3	The use of foreign languages in school was cited as a reinforcing factor
Cultural identity reorientation	4	Respondents observed youth increasingly identifying with global rather than local culture
Emotional distancing / safety	3	Foreign languages were associated with greater emotional control or less vulnerability

Source: compiled by Y. Nisrine.

The findings of this study demonstrate that the preference for foreign languages in emotional expression among Moroccan youth is not a superficial linguistic habit but a multifaceted sociolinguistic phenomenon. Participants' justifications reflect a complex interplay of affective, cultural, and identity-related factors.

Firstly, the most recurrent theme across all three questions was the perception that English and French offer greater lexical precision and stylistic flexibility for expressing emotions. This confirms earlier observations in sociolinguistic literature that lexical availability influences emotional fluency, especially in multilingual settings (Dewaele, 2013). Participants frequently described Darija as *too direct*, *too raw*, or lacking *expressive nuance*, which led them to seek more emotionally calibrated vocabulary in foreign languages.

Secondly, many respondents linked emotional expression in foreign languages to psychological comfort or emotional distancing. These results echo previous research suggesting that non-native languages can serve as a buffer, reducing vulnerability or emotional intensity (Pavlenko, 2006). In this study, foreign languages were not only seen as more *comfortable*, but also as tools for *self-protection* in contexts involving shame, intimacy, or conflict (Green, Abutalebi, 2013).

A third key finding concerns cultural alignment and identity projection. Participants often reported feeling like a “different person” or embodying a different communicative style when switching languages. This finding supports the view that language choice is inherently tied to identity performance and cultural affiliation (Norton, 2000). Through foreign language use, respondents aligned themselves with globalized media, digital content, or aspirational cultural models, especially in emotionally expressive domains.

Furthermore, the role of media and education emerged as critical. Exposure to emotional language in films, series, and social networks — especially in English — was cited as a major influence on participants’ expressive habits. In addition, the dominance of foreign languages in higher education was seen as reinforcing the shift away from Darija in formal and affective communication. These findings are consistent with previous studies on linguistic imperialism and media-mediated identity in postcolonial contexts (Phillipson, 1992; Albirini, 2016).

It is also important to note that, despite this preference for foreign languages, some respondents expressed hope that Darija could reclaim emotional expressiveness in the future. This suggests a potential space for linguistic revalorization, especially as Moroccan society becomes more emotionally open. In recent years, public discourse in Morocco has begun to normalize discussions of mental health, emotional vulnerability, and self-expression — especially among youth and online communities. This cultural shift may gradually create more room for local languages, such as Darija, to expand their emotional range and discursive legitimacy. Similar tensions between global and local languages have been documented in other multilingual societies undergoing cultural transition (Blommaert, 2010).

This study examined the preference among young Moroccans to express emotions in foreign languages rather than in Darija, with the aim of identifying the linguistic and sociocultural factors underlying this phenomenon. The analysis was based on 64 open-ended responses to three carefully formulated questions, interpreted through thematic coding.

The results revealed that the use of English and French in emotionally charged communication is primarily motivated by perceptions of lexical richness, emotional comfort, and greater expressive flexibility. Foreign languages were frequently described as more nuanced or less emotionally intense than Darija, allowing speakers to express vulnerability or complex feelings with greater ease. Additionally, emotional expression in foreign languages was often shaped by media exposure, multilingual education system, and cultural identification with globalized models of discourse.

These findings confirm and deepen existing sociolinguistic observations that language choice in multilingual contexts is rarely neutral, particularly when it comes to affective expression. Rather, it is deeply embedded in issues of identity construction, cultural orientation, and linguistic ideology. While some participants viewed Darija

as emotionally limited or socially constrained, others expressed optimism about its evolving role — especially considering Morocco’s ongoing shift toward more emotionally open public discourse.

By shedding light on how foreign languages are perceived not merely as tools of communication but as emotional registers, this study contributes to broader discussions on language, identity, and affect in multilingual societies. It also underscores the need for further research into the emotional dimensions of language use in postcolonial and diglossic settings such as Morocco.

Conclusion

The conducted study has allowed for an in-depth examination of the complex phenomenon of language choice for emotional expression in multilingual Moroccan society. The analysis of qualitative data obtained from youth representatives reveals that this choice is not arbitrary but is deeply embedded in a system of sociocultural relations, individual psychology, and global trends.

The main findings of the work confirm that the shift to French and English in emotionally charged contexts is a strategic and motivated act. Firstly, the perceived limitations of Darija in lexical and stylistic terms play a key role. Research participants consistently described their native dialect as overly direct, “raw”, or lacking the subtle nuances necessary to convey complex feelings such as vulnerability, nostalgia, or romantic attachment. Foreign languages, in contrast, are perceived as richer and more precise tools for emotional articulation, creating a sense of greater expressive freedom.

Secondly, an important psychological aspect was identified — the phenomenon of emotional distancing. A foreign language functions as a kind of protective barrier, allowing for the expression of intimate or painful experiences with less sense of shame, embarrassment, or social risk. This “safe distance” makes non-native languages the preferred medium for discussing topics that are tabooed or strictly regulated by cultural norms within the framework of Darija.

Thirdly, the study showed that language choice is inextricably linked to identity construction and projection. By switching to French or English, speakers do not merely change a code; they also activate a specific social role — one that is more cosmopolitan, modern, and educated. This choice reflects a sociocultural reorientation among a significant portion of youth who, through language, seek to associate themselves with global values, digital communities, and media content dominated precisely by these languages. Thus, emotional speech in a foreign language becomes an act of self-positioning in the world.

Furthermore, the research highlights the structural factors that reinforce this trend. The higher education system, where French and English are languages of

prestige and knowledge, and the pervasive influence of global media (films, series, social networks) continuously shape the emotional vocabulary and discursive practices of the younger generation, displacing Darija from the sphere of reflective and emotional communication.

However, the data do not point to a simple and irreversible language shift. Despite the clear dominance of foreign languages in the studied context, respondents' answers also expressed concern about the marginalization of Darija and hope for its adaptation. An emerging trend in Moroccan society towards greater openness in discussing psychological well-being and emotions could create space for expanding the expressive functions of local languages. The future is seen not in replacement, but in a complex hybrid or complementary model, where Darija, French, English, as well as Standard Arabic and Tamazight will occupy their niches in speakers' emotional repertoires, reflecting the multi-layered nature of their identity.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of how, in the context of globalization and multilingualism, language becomes not merely a means of conveying emotions, but an active tool for managing emotional experience, social image, and cultural affiliation. The obtained results open up prospects for further research into the dynamics of "emotional literacy" in different languages, the transformation of language ideology in postcolonial societies, and the role of the digital environment in shaping the emotional registers of the modern individual.

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