

*Khal*: An Exploration of the Language  
around Blackness in Morocco

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## Introduction

*The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956) is perhaps the most well known and the most provocative conjecture about the relationship between language and thought. According to the theory, speakers ... are locked into the world view given to them by their language: `The "real world" is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group' (Sapir, 1951 [1929])...[and] colour language can affect colour cognition. (Davies et al 1)*

### **Purpose and Thesis**

Morocco has been described as a melting pot. While various ethnicities, religious beliefs, and languages merge and intermingle within the country, the language in the majority of Moroccan homes is Darijaa. The language itself is a mixture of the Amazigh language and classical and popular Arabic with some European elements. Additionally, Darijaa is the language through which the majority of Moroccans have come to understand the world and the people around them. It is also through this language that I will explore conceptions of blackness and black identity in Morocco. Through evaluating the words for “black” in Darijaa, I hope to reveal the ways in which language may affect social constructions of a black identity in Morocco.

My interest in this project stems from my experiences walking the streets of Morocco. I am a black woman, and upon my arrival in Morocco, in Africa, I wore my hair in an Afro, which is a symbol of black pride. When I got to the country, I learned quickly through comments made towards me and mostly through stares, that I was an oddity here. Even when I wrapped my hair, the stares and comments continued. I began to wonder what people on the streets were calling me and also what the discourse on blackness is in Morocco.

I certainly had preconceptions, as a black woman, of what coming to Africa would be like. I thought that black identity would be a point of praise throughout the

continent. As a product of the African Diaspora, I thought that I was coming home, and while I have found home here, I had to look for it.

Through my research and discussions with Moroccans I have found black to be synonymous in many social instances with dark skin/bodies, sexual vitality (for black women), poverty, famine, slavery, honesty, piousness, sub-Saharan, ugliness, difference, “like a Moroccan,” “them,” “they,” “the other,” and African. Many of the words I learned in Darijaa do not have exact definitions, but their connotation is what counts in terms of attempting to outline a discourse around blackness. Though I did look to history for a potential framework for the contemporary use of the words for black, finding the etymology of the words was not the goal. It would take much more time and linguistic training to establish the origins of the words and how they morphed into their current meaning. The purpose of this research is to discover the ways in which the words for black in Darijaa are applied contemporarily. And after much research and inquiry I have observed that black appears to be a term and an identity that many Moroccans can recognize but not easily define. I believe that the connotation of the words used to describe blackness in Darijaa creates a social context and discourse around the terms and indeed around those upon whom the terms are ascribed.

### **Methodology**

I began my research with a self-ethnography of sorts, taking notes on reactions to me while walking through the streets of Rabat. I recorded the instances in which I was made aware of my difference and blackness. This was one method that I used to collect data. Additionally, I conducted a series of interviews in order to get a sense of what conversations were happening between Moroccans about blackness. So I drafted a set of

interview questions about perceptions of blackness in Morocco, and, with these questions, I completed seven interviews—six in person and one through e-mail. The interviewees were both literate and illiterate women and men. I thought that it would be interesting to see if those who had access to education, and thus more exposure to language, would have different conceptions of blackness. Within that sample, I interviewed five women and two men—an imbalance that I will discuss later. Four of my interviews (the urban interviews with literate Moroccans) were conducted in English, and the other three (rural interviews with illiterate Moroccans) were conducted in Darijaa with the help of a translator. The consent of all the participants was obtained before the interview began, and the consent of each participant was recorded on an audio device. All names of the interviewees will remain confidential, and so my interviews are referenced according to location and number. For an eighth interview, I drafted a different set of interview questions for an expert in North African History. The purpose of this last interview was to investigate the ways in which historical interpretations of black identity might affect modern conceptions of blackness. My last method of data collection was to explore literature about Moroccan identity. These were my three main methods for gathering data: self-ethnography, interviews, and reading literature.

### **Complications, Ethics and Future Research**

Of course, there were difficulties throughout the process of completing this project. First, I was not able to find much textual information about black Moroccans or blacks in Morocco. There were few sources on the topic and some sources that I did find were in Standard Arabic (Foosha) or French, neither of which I read or speak fluently. Immediately I realized that in order to do a project on the ways in which Moroccans have

and continue to represent blackness in literature, knowing French, or Foosha was necessary. And so I had to rely heavily on my interviews with Moroccans, especially my interview with the expert on North African history as he was well versed in the literature on the topic. My first three interviews were conducted in a village in the mountains. All of my interviewees in the village were illiterate and non-English speaking; thus I had to use a translator. As is usually the case in these situations, I believe that some dialogue was lost in translation. I ended up learning more words from the translator in English to describe the words that the interviewees used to describe blackness as opposed to the actual words in Darijaa for black. The experience was very helpful in terms of finding a meaning for the words that they used, but it left me wondering about what I might have missed.

Also, I had trouble getting interviews with males. The social situation was such that I did not feel comfortable approaching men, especially when I was alone, to ask them to participate in an interview; and the women that I interviewed did not have many male friends to recommend. It took visiting the university in Rabat and attending a class in order to get contacts in a “safe” way. With all of the interviews that I completed in person I felt as if there was some level of reserve and caution in the people I questioned. When I asked about black Moroccans, the initial response of most of my interviewees was to tell me that there is no real discrimination in Morocco despite the fact that none of my questions included words like “discrimination” or “conflict” or “racism” or even “difference.” Perhaps this response was due in large part to the fact that I was a black woman interviewing Moroccans about blackness. This reserve was something of which I was conscious throughout the project and I believe it did affect just how forthcoming my

interviewees were with me. Their response also indicated to me that perhaps there was discrimination of which many Moroccans are aware, but know better than to mention. Another dynamic that may have been at play was that I was a United States citizen asking questions. Many participants in the research made it a point to reassure me that Morocco was a very safe place. Their reassurance may have been due to popular stereotypes in the United States about how dangerous Islam and Islamic countries are. My interviewees were more than likely aware of these stereotypes and used the interview as an opportunity to refute them.

Another issue that I faced was finding self identifying, English speaking black Moroccans. For my urban interviews, my pool was largely university/student-based; and some of the people that were called black because they were dark complexioned did not identify themselves as such. After exploring Morocco's history, I was able to find possible reasons for avoiding the label "black." If I get the opportunity to return to this research in the future, I think that my sample would include more people ranging more widely in age and region. All of the interviews took place in Rabat and so traveling to different regions may create different data. It would be interesting also to speak with people who do not speak Darijaa in the home in order to explore whether a different language in the home creates different conceptions of blackness within a Moroccan context. I think that it would be very interesting to explore other words like "Arab," "Amazigh," "Moroccan," and "white" and their connotations in Darijaa. A great amount of text translations was not accessible to me during this period of research. With more time and perhaps a translator, I would attempt to access the national library and other sources in Foosha and French that may give me more historical understanding of the

country. Inshallah, more in depth research on the morphology of the words in Darijaa that describe blackness will be possible in the future.

## Chapter 1: Azzi

### 10/28/07- The Etymology of a Stare

Kids are the worst. When they look at me, it is not just an element of wonder that I see in their eyes, but fear as well. I just passed two children on the street. My hair was wrapped in a brown bandanna and my body was covered with running pants and a sweatshirt, an outfit that I had seen other women in the same day. Their mother glanced at me and looked away, but they kept staring-even cocked their head back and forth as if it might help them to understand. Then after they had passed, they looked back. I know because I have begun to look back at those who stare at me. The looks that I get from people have been so many that I hardly know how to react. In a second, my heart skips a beat and I think "Should I ignore it? Should I stare back? Should I give an evil eye and make them think I am a black spirit? Should I laugh at them and see how they like it?" And in the end, by the time I figure out what I want to do, they have already passed. And so I usually look back to figure out why, and when I turn around I meet their eyes again (I realize though that in order to "give them a taste of their own medicine," I would probably have to stare at them first, point and chuckle a little bit, and I don't think I have it in me to intentionally make someone feel that way). That's what happened with the kids today, when I turned to look, they were still staring and tugging on their mothers skirt as if to ask a question. I just imagined them asking, "*What is it? Will it hurt me?*" And this is the kicker, when I went from looking at their eyes to the rest of them I saw that they were children that would be classified as "black" in the United States. (Johnson Journal, "Untitled" 28 Oct. 2007)

The journal entry above describes another Moroccan language of sorts-the language of the stare. It was through this nonverbal communication that I first became aware of color consciousness in Morocco.

Before coming to Morocco, I did not have many preconceived notions, but I will admit that I was expecting to come home in the sense that I was returning to Africa. I say returning not because I have been before, but because my ancestry is that of those taken from the continent and enslaved all over the world. My family's destination was the United States, but my country has not been particularly hospitable to black people. So I have often wondered about a place where black people were appreciated and even praised

for their merits—a place where black people could be happy as human beings. As an African in Diaspora, Africa became the embodiment of that wish, Africa became home in my mind. I realize that these sentiments were a bit idyllic, but when I came to Morocco, my aforementioned feelings lingered. Perhaps this was why the stares and apparent bewilderment that I received from women, men and especially children upon seeing me impacted me as it did.

Now one may ask how I can know that the stares are actually questioning or fearful. Truthfully I cannot know this for all stares, but it is the moments when stares turn to audible action in which I learn to recognize what the eyes say before the mouth starts to speak. When my hair is in an afro, and so it has been during my time in Morocco, is usually when I get these types of reactions. I remember two school girls in the street. They were involved in their own conversation and wearing blue jeans, flat polka dot shoes and the blue sleeveless vest which represented the school that they attend. When they saw me, it was almost as if they were in shock. Their eyes widened. They stared in disbelief and before they even spoke, I knew what they would say. One girl screamed, “Oh my God,” and both began to laugh uncontrollably. I will not forget their eyes in that moment, and the look that was given to me then is the same look that I see in so many who say nothing. Well, I guess their eyes say it all. In Fes some people in the medina stared before they chuckled. In Assilah a group of school boys stared, talked amongst themselves, and then decided that they would yell “Mama Africa” at me. In Essauoira men stared and proceeded to yell “Senegal! Jamaica!” perhaps in an effort to establish my origin. When I received verbal affirmation of what the eyes were saying, I could not doubt the intention of the stare any longer. I was forced to deal with the impact

of being perceived as ugly and odd to the point of questioning if I really was. And I was defenseless against it.

11/3/07 - Entering Boujad

The little boys are laughing at me. I thought that I would not be able to collect data in a group, but damnit, they can pick me out (I guess it's not hard considering this group). Allow me to explain. When we entered this town, there was a band and large groups of people waiting. It is the 1 year anniversary of the center here and today, a partnership was signed. On the way in and out of our destination, a series of events happened.

1. Two little boys pointed at me and started laughing hysterically. They yelled azzi at me.
2. Outside the bus right now, a little girl in a "guess who" t-shirt grabbed the boy next to her, and pointed at me from below the bus. When I looked, she jolted backwards, placed her head behind the boys, and laughed so hard that I could see every vein in her neck. Again, if she had said nothing, her eyes would have said it all. I hate this feeling. This feeling of defenselessness and shame and sadness and questioning all balled into one. I hate that a child can make me feel like an insecure child, and even bring me to tears after enough ridicule. I do not like this feeling at all. I wonder if other black people here can relate to this feeling. And so it appears that the children are a great starting point for evaluating the stares of adults. For the most part, adults seem to know how to be "courteous," and so they say nothing. (Johnson Journal, "Entering Boujad," 03 Nov. 2007)

At the time of this second entry I had been contemplating my research topic and getting a sense of the words in Darijaa for "black." One of the first that I was told was "azzi," and indeed it was the first word that I was called on the street and comprehended. At the time I did not know what the word meant, I only knew that it was a bad word, one of the worst to call a black person, and that perhaps it would equate with the word "nigger" in English. As one of the first words I encountered, "azzi" was also one of the first words of which I found the origin. Through interviews with Moroccans, I discovered the definition of "azzi." According to my interview with the North African expert,

The origin of 'azzi' is not 'black' because [a] lot of black slave[s] [didn't] call their master their name, they call them 'azzizi.' 'Azzizi' means honey. For example, my

uncle, I say uncle and I can say honey. It's not in sexual relation; it is [out of] respect that I can respect him 'azzizi,' but when I am with someone [who] is not my uncle, he is the brother of my wife, I can say 'hajj' or 'azzizi' or something like that. It's like uncle but it [implies] more respect. (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007)

Another person told me that the word meant "my dear one" (African Institute Researcher 29 Nov 2007). I have not experienced the word positively. This is a fine example of the ways in which the denotation and connotation of a word can be vastly different. We see examples like this in the English language with words like "chick," a name for a baby chicken but quite derogatory when directed towards a female. It is in this way that "azzi" is understood when directed towards a black person in Morocco. And it suggests that something else must be at work—something in a societal context that transforms the meaning of the word. I found little literature on what that something might be or how the connotation of the word evolved. But in its contemporary usage as a word in Darijaa for "black," "azzi" is a negative word, and it paints a negative picture of those to whom the word is ascribed. The real danger of the word is that "azzi" does not appear to ascribe specific attributes to "black," so that, in creating black identity, the word does not produce characteristics that can be refuted, but rather a body of blackness which is something that is not good. The eyes that I have met daily on the street have relayed this connotation to me and have told me that, in me, something just is not right.

But for the most part, no one spoke to me and, if they did, it was only at me. Usually they just stared. I have been reminded of Frantz Fanon's story in which he relates that it was when he was called out as a black person, that black was ascribed to him and his body, and he became black (109). The eyes that I have met on the street call louder than words ever could, and I have "become black" a hundred times over. Consequently I have become different, ugly, odd, and unnatural, among other things with

every call. Indeed, I met a great deal of Moroccans that did not impress these feelings upon me, but for the majority of my interactions on the city streets, this is what occurred. And so black has become synonymous with all of the above stated attitudes in my Moroccan experience. I began to wonder if my experience was unique, or if there was something in the Moroccan discourse that was propagating negative stereotypes and attitudes about blackness. So I went to the history texts and narratives to see if that something that altered the connotation of the word “azzi” lies within Morocco’s history.

## Chapter 2: Abd

Some people think that black people in Morocco [came] with the slavery system. This is a big mistake because in Morocco, black people and Berber people [were] here at the beginning of history. Slavery is not the only origin of the coming of black people in Morocco because we are in Africa and [there was always a lot of] relation between Morocco...and the south of Sahara...And at the beginning of history we can find [a] lot of archaeological materials to prove that black people and Berber people[were here]...I think that the people of North Africa [were] mixed at the beginning of history because the relation across the Sahara was all the time a reality. This is the first thing. (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007)

This was how my interview with the doctor began. He is a professor at the Muhammad V University in Rabat as well as a researcher at the Institute of African Studies, an organization dedicated to the study of African cultures, languages, and issues. His area of expertise is in North African history. Our conversation covered a large range of Moroccan history, from pre-Islam to modern day. In an hour there is only so much that we could possibly discuss, but there were main points of importance that the doctor emphasized. The first is that black people have been in Morocco since the beginning of Morocco's history. Perhaps I should interject that in my other interviews and conversations with Moroccans, the word "black" was synonymous with sub-Saharan Africa. The doctor made it clear to me that this was not true and that to separate black from Morocco is to be historically inaccurate. But knowledge of the presence of black people in pre-Islam Morocco is limited.

In his article, "The Cycle of Invasion and Unification in the Western Sahara," John Mercer notes that black people were present in Morocco at the country's beginning, "Traditionally, the western desert was once in the hands of a black people, the Bafots; these had possibly migrated northwards during the inter-pluvial which began about 5500 BC"(498). This was a singular article as I was not able to find much more information on

the Bafots. One might ask in this instance though, whether it is fair to classify the first peoples of Morocco according to contemporary racial/ethnic categories. When studying race in a historical context it is always important to note that race was not always a part of history as we understand it today. Indeed, this may be a reason that historical texts and accounts of Morocco do not include black people as black. Many kings in Morocco were black, but were not recorded as such. "In history, there is not specific situation about black people because most of our king[s] in lot of our dynasty...[were] black. They were black, [and] there [was] no problem. For the Alawite situation because there mother [was] black or because there father [was] black" (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007). In evaluating these analyses of the black presence in Morocco historically, a crucial issue presents itself. When did black people become black in a Moroccan context?

Tom Meisenhelder attempts to define when black was inscribed upon the body of Africans.

The earliest European images of the African "other" are fictions grounded in Biblical texts, ancient fables, and traveler's tales. In other words, the image arose before its evidence. The cultural "frame" actually preceded the "picture." Jordan (1974:52) notes that it was only around the 1680s, after contact with peoples of color, that Europeans begin to identify themselves as "white." We have seen that it is by defining the African other as a "black body" that the European identified itself as a "white soul." Using the ideas of Lacan (1977) it is possible to see that European cultural identity was formed in part via the confused introjection of the African other. (107)

My reasons for using this quote are two-fold. In the 1680's, when the word "black" took on racial connotations, it was synonymous with African identity. I found much evidence of the synonymous nature of the two terms in my interviews with present day Moroccans. I do not mean to suggest anything about Moroccan relation to black identity with this quotation, I simply wish to suggest that many historical texts, from Morocco's beginning

until the Alawite dynasty may lack any mention of black persons because black had not yet been created. It is not until the Alawites took control of Morocco in the late seventeenth century that we begin to see mention of blacks in Moroccan historical texts. And these first mentions of blacks in the historical discourse may influence the contemporary one.

There was just a second in history that black people have a specific history in Morocco. I think in the seventeenth century in the period of the King Moulay Ismail...In his period (1672-1727) there [were] lot[s] of problem[s]. His capital was Meknes. He had some problem with the Oragachi in Fes and some problem with Marrakech and he build his capital in Meknes. But he have some problem with...all the tribe in Morocco, and he think that Monarchy in Morocco must have an army without any social and [ethnic] relation. Because if there was social and [ethnic] relation, the army could take part in [ethnic] apartanance against the King. That's why he search[ed] to constitute another army with black people. And he bring this black people from south of Morocco. From lot of other city in Morocco. And they are not specifically slave. Part of them are slave and other part are free, and he made this army what we call the army of al-bukhari and after that we said the slaves of al-bukhari. (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007)

Black people entered historical texts in Morocco in relation to slavery. Indeed Moulay Ismail's army is also referred to as the "black army" (Pennell 21). This may be a reason that the word for slave in Darijaa, "abd," is used derogatorily towards black people. According to the North African expert, slavery was a reality in Moroccan history, but it was not specific to a particular race or ethnicity. There were white, black, Arab, and Amazigh slaves in Morocco (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007). The early associations of the words may have influenced their current usage. The position of a slave in Morocco was the lowest historically in terms of the social strata (Pennell 32). When used contemporarily, the word "abd" ascribes poverty upon its recipient so that perhaps the historical situation of slavery in Morocco and these early references to blacks as slaves provide the framework for the contemporary usage of the word negatively. In his book,

*Morocco Since 1830: A History*, C.R. Pennell defines the word “abd”: “abd (pl abid) – slave: can be used in a religious sense in many names coupled with one of the names of God (e.g. Abd el Rahman – ‘servant of the Compassionate’) or literally, in which case it often refers to black people. Many of the members of the army were originally black slaves and were referred to as the Abid al-Bukhari” (Glossary xxix). Here the author gives a denotation of the word “abd,” Interestingly, without context, the real meaning of the word is not clear. In religious terms, “abd” has positive implications, but racially, the implication is negative and the association is with black people. Thus connotation becomes very important when evaluating the meaning of the words. And while we may find a framework for modern usage of “abd” in Morocco’s history, other words, like “azzi,” do not have much textual history on the words’ current usage or the ways in which the meaning of words in Darijaa has morphed. But there is another period in Morocco’s history that may have been instrumental in forming contemporary notions of “black” as different and as synonymous with “African.”

During the 1950’s Morocco gained independence from France. At the time of independence, another movement contributed considerably to Morocco’s national identity. The Pan-Arab Movement was a society of self-identified Arab nations that believed that ‘Arabs should be united in a single state’ (Rubin 535). One of the leaders of the movement was the former president of Egypt, Gamal Abdul Nasser. Nigerian theorist, Adeoye Akinsanya has described attitudes towards Africa that developed during the movement.

Nasser’s ideas about the role of Egypt in Africa in particular and that of the Arabs in general can be discerned from his *The Philosophy of the Revolution*. The role that Nasser envisaged for Egypt in Africa [was] complete with references to Egypt’s

'manifest destiny' and 'civilizing mission' in the 'interior of the Dark Continent'. He held that:

'...We cannot under any condition, even if we wanted to, stand aloof from the terrible and terrifying battle now raging in the heart of that Continent between five million whites and two hundred million Africans. We cannot stand aloof for one important and obvious reason-we ourselves are in Africa. Surely the people of Africa will continue to look to us-we who...constitute the connecting link between the Continent and the outside world. We certainly cannot...relinquish our responsibility to help to our utmost in spreading light of knowledge and civilization up to the very depth of the virgin jungles of the Continent.' (512-513)

This quotation paints a picture describing the Pan-Arab movement as a driving force in the separation of Arabs in Africa from blacks in Africa and consequently the separation of North Africa from "sub-Saharan" Africa. Note that the president does not say that we, Arabs, are African, rather, that Arabs are "in Africa." The north-south binary presented here privileges North Africa as the civilized, developed part of the continent and disadvantages sub-Saharan Africa as archaic, underdeveloped and in need of northern Africa to be its guide. As a result, being Arab is set in opposition to being African during this time period. I found evidence of this assertion throughout the interviews I conducted.

During my interview with the expert on North African history, I asked him if, in his experience, being Moroccan is the same as being African. He responded as follows.

Well this is a big question. You know in the constitution of Morocco they say in the preamble of the constitution that Morocco is a monarchy; is African monarchy with Islam as religion [and] with Arab[ic] as [the] official language. In our constitution we do not say we are Arab. Our official language is Arab[ic] but we are Muslim and we are African. This is the first thing...But yes, we can say that [some] Moroccan people don't think they are...African because to be Arab in Islam is very important. We can be in a good social situation if we are coming from Arab roots if we are coming from the Mecca because we...are at the origin of Islam. This social and cultural situation can be very interesting if you want to have a good situation in society. But it's not all of us, we can [find] distinction[s]. But I agree that some Moroccan people don't think they are more African

than Arab. And we must not forget that after 1952,53 there was a big movement in [the] Arab world, the pan-Arabism movement by the Nasserism in Egypt Gamal Abdul Nasser, the Ba'th Party in Syria, in Iraq and they influence most of the Arabic people that the Arab nation must be woken...and...this Arab party influenced a lot of Arabic people to be more Arabic than other things...[it] influence[d] most of Moroccan people. (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007)

The pan-Arab movement was an important component of Moroccan national identity. And so to were the facets of the movement that not only distinguished an Arab identity from an African one, but made Arab identity an important factor for a Muslim country (Howe 172). When black identity was created, it was done upon the bodies of Africans (Meisenhelder 107). Perhaps by separating themselves, from being African, those involved and influenced by the movement also set themselves apart from blackness. Thus “black” and “African” were solidified in their synonymy and the aforementioned stereotypes of Africans as uncivilized, underdeveloped and in need of assistance that were formed during the movement transferred onto dark skinned people. I found more evidence of this when I conducted interviews with Moroccans about the words for “black” in Darijaa and black identity in Morocco.

### Chapter 3: Khal

Other than the interview with the doctor, I conducted seven interviews with self-identified Moroccans. Six of them were completed in person, and the seventh was completed through e-mail. For these seven interviews I used a set of questions about the term “black” and black identity in Morocco (Questions Attached, See Appendix 1). I asked interviewees to describe Moroccans and Africans as well as their perceptions of black people in Morocco. I also asked them about Gnawa people as popular representations of blackness in Morocco and about their perceptions of me when we first met. Additionally I asked about perceptions of sub-Saharan immigrants to Morocco. Most importantly, I asked participants to tell me the words that they had heard in Darijja to describe blackness and to tell me which words had positive connotations and which words had negative connotations. With these questions, I intended to gather a sense of not only the meaning of the word “black,” but also the type of identity and relation to black people in Morocco that the connotations of the word might create. My questions were a product of conversations that I had with Moroccans early on during my stay in Morocco as well as assistance from my advisor.

Attitudes that may have stemmed from the pan-Arab movement of the 1950’s were evident in most of the interviews. In my first three interviews, which took place in the rural Moroccan village of El Masaahat, the participants all said that of course they were Moroccan, but that they were not African. A response from the second interview exemplifies the responses of other participants.

Do you identify as Moroccan?

Yes

Do you identify as African? Why or why not?

No because we talk as Moroccans to each other. We are only Moroccans and nothing but Moroccan. Morocco is an Islamic countr[y]. Other African countries or Africa is not Muslim. Moroccans fast and give alms and slaughter the sheep at Eid. (Village-One 8 Nov 2007)

This quote is an example of the ideas about Africa that persist for some Moroccans despite a limited exposure to the rest of Morocco and Africa. Note that a point of importance is that Morocco is Muslim and that Africa is not. Maybe these ideas stemmed from those presented and dispersed during the beginning days of the pan-Arab movement. With the urban interviews, all of the participants said that they were both Moroccan and African, but when I asked them to describe a Moroccan and an African, I received some different responses. In my first interview at the university, a female student told me,

I can describe a Moroccan person generally that eh we have a stereotype that Moroccan people are eh generous are good people are hospitable are friendly, and also you can ask them about anything and they can answer you. And also you will not find some problems here, especially in Morocco because last summer I went to Emirates and I find some difficulties, I found some difficulties with people I can't connect with them, but here in Morocco I feel better. Like Europe, like America, Like that.

*How would you describe an African?*

I can describe an African person eh that an African person, how? how? how? Eh ...African person...it's a question that I have never...it's a eh African person. We can say that Europe they have also a stereotype about African people. African people you are from Africa that you are poor, you are like that, you feel famine, something like that. But our continent...has known something important and...it will develop day after day. (University-One 21 Nov 2007)

The students seemed to be able to relate to Africa as the continent in which their country lies, but not too much beyond that. That is, when it came to ascribing attributes to the terms “Moroccan” and “African,” the quantifiers changed which suggested to me a difference in perception of Moroccans and Africans. If this were not the case, than the participants identification as Moroccan and African, would reflect a similar description of the two terms. These notions of an African identity as other than a Moroccan one were

present in six of eight of the interviews that I conducted. I believe that the pan-Arab movement may have been influential in these attitudes. But pan-Arab ideas were not the only attitudes present in the interviews. There were words other than “African” that were used to describe “black” in Darijaa. From these words I got a clearer sense of the discourse around blackness in Morocco.

As I mentioned earlier, the interviews were divided between illiterate and literate persons. In the village, illiterate, sample there appeared to be a difference of opinion, as far as perceptions of blackness goes, according to the age of the participants. Their ages were twenty six, around forty and around sixty. The older participants had not encountered, or at least they did not tell me about, negative perceptions of black people in Morocco. Only the younger participant told me that perhaps black people were uglier than white people (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). This may have been because she was more forthcoming than the other participants, but it may have also been an issue of exposure perhaps to a more recent import into the village, television.

On the day that I was able to coordinate times for interviews with the translator, it was a market day in the village and so most of the village men were away. It is for this reason that two out of three of my interviews were with women. It is also for this reason that the man that I did interview was much older. My first interview was with a twenty six year old woman. She, like other interviewees in the village, did not know much of life outside of her village, much less Morocco. She could not identify with the lifestyles or identities that lay outside of the area that surrounded her village.

Thus, sub-Saharan in these interviews translated to Saharan, or south Morocco for the participants; and Saharan was synonymous with black for all of the rural interviewees.

During the second village interview, I asked a woman, who was around forty years old, what words she had heard to describe black in Darijaa.

She responded, “Saharan. This is the only word that the people use to talk about black people” (Village-Two 8 Nov 2007). Saharan seemed to denote origins from the south of Morocco as well as blackness, but at this point in the interview, I had not uncovered the potential connotations of the word in its usage towards or about black people. I asked another woman, about the attitudes she had towards [Sub-] Saharan Africans?

She replied that, “They are okay. They are good. Some men are married to Saharan people [from the far south of Morocco]...They are like Moroccans, the only difference is language” (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). It was interesting that at another point in the interview she had said that black Moroccans were “Moroccan 100%,” but here she noted that Saharans, synonymous with blacks, were ‘like Moroccans,’ not Moroccans. This suggests the existence of notions of blackness as different or other than Moroccan. But it does not follow that this difference must be negative. Indeed, for the two older participants in the research, the word that they knew in Darijaa for “black” was “makohl” which means honest. They also described Saharans as “promise keepers,” “pious,” and “good Muslims.” (Village-Two and Village-Three 8 Nov 2007).

Only the younger interviewee said that, “...Black people are considered here as not being as handsome as the white [or light] skinned people” (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). I went on to ask her for the most negative word she had heard to “black.” She responded, “Ugly” (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). Ten years ago, which is how much older the second interviewee was than this young lady, there were no televisions in the village. Now,

virtually every home in the village has a television that operates on solar power since there is not yet electricity. Much of the television programming that I watched with my host family in the village and in Rabat privileged lighter skin as beautiful. Perhaps this type of influence affects the value that words for “black” in Darijaa receive. I saw evidence of this in urban interviews with literate students at the Souissi location of Mohammed V University.

During these interviews I learned many words for “black” in Darijaa. The first interview was with an eighteen-year old female student at the university. She informed me of two words in Darijaa for “black,” “khal” and “azoi.” “Black in Darijaa? Our dialect? Yes we can say uh in Arabic yes, in dialect we can say uh Khal, Azoi...that’s all.” When I asked her to translate the terms for me, she only translated “khal,” “Ah, khal in dialect and we can translate it as blackness, black people...that’s all” (University-One 21 Nov 2007). “Khal” is the first word that I encountered in my research. When I talked to my advisor, she informed me that “khal” is a word for black, and from what I could gather from my other interviews and conversations, “khal” is the most neutral word in terms of having neither a predominately positive or negative connotation. Two older people told me that the word is not used to describe black people in any particular way but it means “black,” as in the color. In terms of negative connotation, I was told that “azoi” matches “azzi,” and perhaps this is the reason that the student was reticent to share the definition of the word (North African Expert 14 November 2007). This type of reserve is something that I noticed in several of my interviews. The students, more so than the people from the village, seemed to be aware of what was inappropriate to tell me as a black woman interviewing them about blackness. When I asked the first two

interviewees about the most negative word for “black” that they knew in Darijaa, they said that they do not use such words and refused to tell me what “such words” were, “Negative word that I have to describe, negative. No, I don’t have it at all, I don’t have this discrimination. I don’t have it in mind at all” (University-One 21 Nov 2007). I talked to the student later, and she said that that there are negative words, but only ignorant people use them.

In the second interview at the university, the interviewee told me of two words in Darijaa to describe black.

What words have you heard to describe black in Darijaa?

Uh... ah yes...azzi, azzi, name yes azzi yea...

And what does it translate too in English?

Uh I say dark or Negro, that’s it ok.

Which is the most negative word?

What? No, no, we don’t use those words, no we don’t no

Which one is the most positive word?

...Misarera. In Darijaa misarer, even he is black, he is cute, or she is beautiful she’s uh kind and so on so on...that’s it. (University-Two 21 Nov 2007)

Though she stated that “we don’t use those words,” the first and only word that she mentioned for the term “black” was “azzi,” a word that takes on negative connotations for blackness. The other word that she mentioned, “misarer” means handsome, but I found it interesting that she first used the quantifier, “even,” as if to say, despite the fact that he is black, he is handsome.

In the third interview with a male student, I learned more words in Darijaa for “black:” “I heard the term “louiyine”...It means the color, but small color. That means, in Arabic, it is not so black, “louiyine” is a little bit more different than others. “Smar.” That means the color exactly...between the black and the white” (University-Three 21 Nov 2007). He then pointed to a light-skinned female student as if to describe her as

“smar.” Of all the words that I learned from these interviews “louyine” and “smar,” were the words that the interviewees told me had the most positive connotations.

It is interesting that the two words with the most positive connotations for “black” also lighten “black” skin. That is, within Darijaa, the words for “black” that carry positive connotations appear to privilege those who are not “completely” black, or those who have lighter skin. Could this be evidence of a social discourse around blackness which disadvantages “black” as it refers to dark-skinned people and privileges skin colors that are “not so black”? Six of seven of my interviewees assured me that, in terms of perception, there is no discrimination in Morocco and that black people are not perceived as different. My seventh interview was through e-mail with a female student. I got her contact from another interviewee, but we never met. When I asked the same question of her, she stated, “[Black people] used to be perceived as second or even third-class citizens, but now I guess it is not the case anymore” (E-mail Interview 3 Dec 2007). Her response was singular in that she was the only one to say that in Morocco, blacks have been seen as different and even discriminated against. Since our correspondence was through e-mail, she was also the only interviewee that did not see me. I had wondered about some level of reserve that I felt from the majority of the interviewees. Perhaps this is an example of the ways in which my presence as a black woman asking about blackness may have affected the types of answers that I received.

When I asked the other six interviewees about their perceptions of me, they presented interesting responses. Five out of six of the interviewees said or implied that I was dark-skinned or black. I asked them how they first perceived me when they saw me and also, if they perceived me as Moroccan, African, or American. The two women in

the village told me that they loved me. But one went on to say that “Though you are dark-skinned, you are the same” (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). An equally interesting response in this case was that of the translator. He had been in discussion with many of the village men and he said that most of them thought that I was African, “But I already heard people talking about you...they would say ‘Is she 100 percent American or is she just studying in America?’ For example, you are from Africa and you went to the United States just for study, because they noted the skin color...” (Village-One 8 Nov 2007). It seemed that a popular conception among the men of the village was that I was African because of my skin color. As I said, on the day of interviews, most of the village men were out to market; and so I could not interview many of them about these perceptions. The man from the village that I did interview said that he thought I was from Rissani, a place in the south of Morocco associated with dark skinned or black people (Village-Three 8 Nov 2007).

At the university, responses varied. A female student said, “...The first time I thought that you are from America yes, but from the black of America. America Africa. Yes, that’s what they call it” (University-One 21 Nov 2007).

Another female student said, “I knew that you are American that’s it. I heard your words when you are talking with [the] teacher and I said, ‘Oh my God, she is not from Africa and she is not Moroccan’ so I thought immediately that you are American, I knew that” (University-Two 21 Nov 2007). Her response indicated to me that before she heard me speak, this student assumed that I was first African. The male student that I interviewed said as much quite simply, “African, I think that you are African, you are African” (University-Three 21 Nov 2007).

These responses confirmed many of my suspicions about the glances that I received while walking through Morocco. On the streets of Morocco, I thought that perhaps people assumed that I was African or black and proceeded to stare or comment based on that assumption. In these responses the interviewees identify me as black or African. This does not assume that the comments of the interviewees was ill-intended. Merely it confirms aspects of my experience that many Moroccans may associate dark skin with “black” and “African.” Combining these conceptions with the connotations for the words in Darijaa for “black” presents an interesting picture of the discourse around blackness in Morocco.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this work, I have explored not only the words for “black” in Darijaa, but also the connotations of those words and the potential attitudes that might form socially as a result of the language. It appears that language in Morocco constructs a social discourse and attitudes towards those upon whom the words are ascribed. In this case, the language for black in Morocco seems to create a discourse in which black or dark skin is underprivileged and “not so black” or light skin is privileged. As I have discussed, the meanings of the words for “black” in Darijaa reflect as much; the words that imply lighter skin are the words with positive connotations. It would follow then that, in society, those who are described as “black” would have the connotations of the words for “black” ascribed upon them, which begs the question, who is described as black? The most prevalent notion that I encountered was that blackness was determined by dark skin. It also seemed as if “black” was a term very easily ascribed to people with dark skin, but not as easily accepted. By this I mean that I did not encounter many dark-skinned Moroccans who readily described themselves as black. Perhaps this reticence is due to the fact that identifying as “black” would also mean absorbing the implications of the word. According to my experiences and the responses of those interviewed during this study, the attributes ascribed upon the term “black” and thus “black” people include “different,” “ugly,” “honest,” “slave,” “like a Moroccan but not a Moroccan,” “pious” etc. The most popular connotations appear to be the negative ones in urban areas. Is it any wonder that in the cities, one might shy from the association? And so it would seem that language does in fact create social attitudes and identity, but perhaps it is not the only

factor in an identity. Language is influenced by the society that uses it perhaps as much as society is influenced by language.

During the time period in which Morocco gained its independence, a time when being Arab became more important than other identities, president Nasser of Egypt said that Arabs were the link between Africa and the rest of the world, “Surely the people of Africa will continue to look to us-we who...constitute the connecting link between the Continent and the outside world” (Akinsanya 513). Former King of Morocco Hassan II also said that ‘Morocco is a country with its roots in Africa and its branches stretched towards Europe’ (North African Expert 14 Nov 2007). As mentioned earlier, European identity was constructed against an African one so that Europe is synonymous with white as Africa is synonymous with black. Is it any wonder then that, with branches stretching towards Europe, the mother tongue of most Moroccans would privilege “not so dark” over dark skin or blackness? Perhaps it is the society that shifts the meaning of words like “azzi” from “honey” to “nigger,” as much as it is “azzi” that creates a negative social implication for blackness. Whatever the case, there seems to be a hierarchy in Morocco based on skin color, and this hierarchy disadvantages blackness.

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\*University-One. Personal Interview. 21 Nov. 2007.

\*University-Two. Personal Interview. 21 Nov. 2007.

\*University-Three. Personal Interview. 21 Nov. 2007.

\*Village-One. Personal Interview. 8 Nov. 2007.

\*Village-Two. Personal Interview. 8 Nov. 2007.

\*Village-Three. Personal Interview. 8 Nov. 2007.

\*Interviewees wished to remain confidential.

## Appendix 1

Interview Questions for ISP - Rachel Johnson

1. Do you identify as Moroccan?
2. Do you identify as African? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe a Moroccan?
4. How would you describe an African?
5. Are there different ethnic groups in Morocco?
6. Are there different races in Morocco?
7. Are there black Moroccans?
8. How are black people perceived in Morocco?
9. What words have you heard to describe black in Darijja?
10. Which is the most negative word?
11. Which one is the most positive word?
12. Who are the Gnawa?
13. How would you describe them?
14. Do you consider them Moroccan?
15. What attitudes do you have towards Sub-Saharan Africans?
16. How did you perceive me when you first saw me?
17. Did you perceive me as a Moroccan, African, or American?

### Glossary

\_\_\_\_\_ -Abd – Slave. When directed towards a black person, the term implies poverty or a low station in life. Apparently the term is only used in conflict.

\_\_\_\_\_ -Azzi (Azoï) – This term may be derived from “Azzizzi” meaning “my honey” or “dear one.” Apparently, slaves in Morocco used to address their master with this term. Contemporarily, the word is used to substitute the word “black.” The word has negative connotations for those upon whom it is ascribed.

\_\_\_\_\_ -Louiyine – Small beautiful color. This term has positive connotations and it is used to describe people that have a small amount of black color in their skin.

\_\_\_\_\_ -Khal – Black, as in the color. This term is used to describe the color black but is rarely used to describe people. It is apparently neutral in its meaning in terms of connotation.

\_\_\_\_\_ -Smar – The color between black and white. This term has positive implications and is usually applied towards people with light skin.