

## REVIEW OF AN INTRODUCTION TO MOROCCAN ARABIC AND CULTURE

### **An Introduction to Moroccan Arabic and Culture**

Abdellah Chekayri

2011

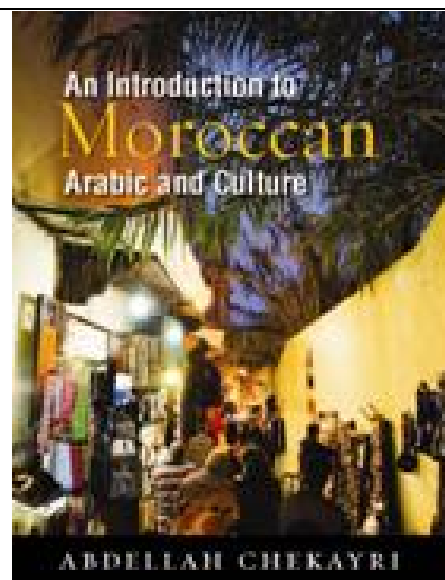
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### **Review by Mike Turner, The University of Texas at Austin**

Over the course of the last decade, Arabic programs in American universities have witnessed significant growth and record levels of enrollment (Furman, Goldberg, & Lusin, 2010), a trend that has reinforced the need for innovative teaching materials and methodologies. Among such developments has been a burgeoning interest in teaching spoken Arabic dialects, a knowledge of which is increasingly viewed as essential to students' overall competence in the language. Although Arabic courses for English-speaking students have conventionally covered only Modern Standard Arabic (MSA)—the language of literature and the traditional media—a growing number of language programs have now begun to integrate dialectal Arabic into their curriculums alongside MSA, thus bolstering the demand for high-quality resources that consider these varieties. Abdellah Chekayri's *An Introduction to Moroccan Arabic and Culture* is the first textbook to provide a comprehensive overview of the basics of the Moroccan Arabic dialect (MA) in a format that is supported by substantial audiovisual material and is designed to correspond with students' concurrent acquisition of MSA.

Recent editions of general Arabic textbooks, such as the widely-used *Al-Kitaab* series (Brustad, Al-Batal, & Al-Tonsi, 2011), use multimedia components to introduce students to the Syrian and Egyptian dialects alongside MSA, but similar resources for Moroccan Arabic have, until recently, been limited. Such a gap exists despite the fact that a number of updated MA materials have become available in recent years. A 2006 re-publication of Harrell's *A Basic Course in Moroccan Arabic* employs an accurate transcription system but suffers from the fact that its texts are largely phrase lists with no focus on a communicative approach, while its multimedia component is no more than a CD of low-quality MP3 renditions of the texts. A 2011 *Moroccan Arabic*—compiled by the Peace Corps and available free online—fares better, with a sensible transcription system and a focus on everyday, communicative tasks, but it too is accompanied by no more than audio renditions of the book's dialogues, all of which are bundled into a single file that is difficult to navigate. Finally, a second edition of *Shnoo the Hell is Going on H'naa* (Sakulich, 2012) does little to improve on the first, with no multimedia content, a scattershot approach to grammar and inconsistent and confusing transcriptions. Chekayri's offering, by contrast, offers an entire DVD replete with audio, video, and interactive learning aids; it is likewise the only one of these resources

to assume previous or concurrent knowledge of MSA.

*An Introduction to Moroccan Arabic and Culture* consists of two primary components. The first is the physical textbook, a sturdy 544-page paperback with a glossy cover and attractive internal design. The book is divided into fourteen chapters, each thematically organized around an aspect of Moroccan cultural life (examples include “Getting Acquainted,” “Daily Activities,” “Shopping,” and “Clothes and Celebrations”). Each of these chapters is further subdivided into discrete sections that focus more exclusively on listening, culture, or grammar; some chapters also include additional materials, and all begin with an overview of the objectives and close with a review of the chapter’s listening passages. Within the sections, students are presented with individual exercises that can be completed either inside or outside of the classroom. The various chapters, sections, and exercises are clearly organized and easy to identify via large headings that utilize a consistent color scheme, and exercises that require audiovisual material from the DVD are marked with a headphone icon. In addition, the book makes extensive use of high-quality color photographs that are relevant to the chapters’ respective themes, and leaves sufficient room for students to write in the book. The author and publisher should accordingly be commended for the textbook’s enticing design and ease of use.

The second component of this publication is what the publisher describes as an “accompanying multimedia DVD” (back cover) that contains audiovisual material designed to be used alongside the exercises in the physical textbook. Worth noting is that the DVD does not employ the DVD-video format that would work with all standard players, but is instead a DVD data disc containing an .exe file designed



Figure 1. Screenshot of DVD component interface.

to run in a Windows environment, thus leaving users of other operating systems without easy access to the technology component. The DVD program itself nonetheless works as intended and contains thousands of audio and video clips of various lengths, all of which are of high quality with minimal static and background noise. These clips can be accessed via the program's menu, which is navigable but not particularly intuitive; unlike the book—which is primarily divided into chapters that contain both linguistic and cultural content—the program instead groups content as belonging to either the “Moroccan Arabic” or “Culture” subsections of the main menu. The fact that a student cannot find all of the materials related to a single thematic chapter in the book within the same subsection of the menu complicates navigation and contributes to a feeling of disjointedness, in contrast to the integrated approach to language and culture found in the physical textbook. One may also cite a number of minor grievances, among them odd scrolling behavior and the fact that it is not always clear which items can be clicked for further information or audio because they are often rendered in the same font and color as inactive items. While the DVD remains a valuable source of information and essential component of the package, it thus stands to benefit from a focus on better organization and presentation.

Unlike most other resources for the Moroccan Arabic dialect, the textbook's approach to the spoken language relies heavily upon the student's simultaneous knowledge or acquisition of Modern Standard Arabic. One place in which this is particularly apparent is in the decision to use unvocalized Arabic script as the primary means of representing the predominantly spoken vernacular in writing. The first three chapters use a functional but less-than-ideal quasi-Latin transcription system to assist those new to the Arabic script—producing aesthetically odd forms such as *šaal*—(“how much,” p. 24), but beginning with the fourth chapter new vocabulary is presented in only the Arabic script. Although this approach is valuable in that it helps students link similar forms present in both MA and MSA, it nonetheless creates difficulties by clinging to MSA orthographic conventions that belie the distinctive phonology of MA. The results are visible in the written presence of initial vowels that are not pronounced in MA (as in أخبار “your news,” p. 24) and in the maintenance of a long-short vowel distinction (as in تَق “taste-imperative,” p. 158), something which is typically not phonemic in MA. Fortunately, most of the uncertainty in pronunciation can be clarified by listening to the accompanying audio files on the DVD, which are clear and provide much better insight into the sounds of MA than do the written representations.

The strength of the accompanying audio files likewise reveals itself in the spoken texts and dialogues that constitute the bulk of the listening activities in the textbook. These recordings, all available on the DVD, have been produced by native Moroccan Arabic speakers and present the target language at a natural, accessible pace that is particularly helpful for exposing learners to the rhythm of informal MA speech. The audio files are of high quality and have been produced by multiple voice actors, likewise giving students an opportunity to hear the language spoken by Moroccans of various backgrounds. Each chapter contains three such “listening subjects,” all of which are supplemented with relevant vocabulary and supporting exercises, including a close listening activity at the end of every chapter. The only caveat worth mentioning is that the listening texts have, as a matter of course, been artificially constructed for learners, and that there is thus no use of “authentic” materials on the DVD. While this approach allows the author better control of the vocabulary and structures presented, as well as the production quality of the audiovisual components themselves, diversifying the offerings with materials not explicitly produced for students could provide a boost to the textbook's relevancy and authenticity.

The same issue of authentic language arises with greater urgency in the case of the book's treatment of some basic vocabulary. In what appears to be an idiosyncratic application of standard language ideology, a number of common vernacular Moroccan Arabic lexical items—particularly those of European origin—have been replaced with Modern Standard Arabic equivalents, even though the latter are rarely used in day-to-day speech. Some examples include MSA *makaan* rather than MA *blaaSa* “place” (p. 27), *masḥuq* rather than *tiid* “detergent” (p. 181), *seyyaara* rather than *Tuumuubiil* “car” (p. 188), and *šaaTi* rather than *plage* “beach” (p. 274). The author tentatively defends such choices with a statement that “the

recorded material avoids localisms in order to be fully comprehensible in other parts of the Arab world” (p. xiv), but it seems hard to reconcile this view with the book’s stated goals of introducing specifically Moroccan Arabic and allowing learners “to interact with native [MA] speakers with ease” (p. xiii). At best, the textbook is sacrificing an opportunity to provide students vocabulary that will be useful in everyday interactions with Moroccans; at worst, the fact that an instructor using the book in a classroom need qualify such items undermines student confidence in the accuracy and usefulness of an otherwise well-conceived textbook, and a future edition would do well to avoid them.

In addition to its focus on more purely linguistic elements of communication, Chekayri’s work deserves recognition for the significant effort it makes to impart cultural knowledge of Moroccan society to its readers. Teaching culture has long been underemphasized in language classrooms, and it is heartening to see a textbook treat culture on par with other aspects of the learning process. Every chapter in the textbook includes at least one section exclusively considering culture, which prompts the student to engage thematically-relevant videos on the accompanying DVD (some examples are “Folk Traditions,” “The Mosque,” “The Public Bath,” and “Expectations During Ramadan”) and then to respond to a series of related questions in MA. The videos are largely presented by a mixed group of English-speaking Moroccan academics and resident foreigners who have lived in Morocco for some time, and all but a few are recorded in English. While there is little doubt that the textbook’s attention to culture is a positive attribute, one nonetheless may see a missed opportunity in the choice to present cultural information both so explicitly and in English. With the use of visual aids already present in many of the cultural videos, much of the information would be better presented in MA, increasing students’ exposure to the language in varied contexts and challenging them to extract cultural information even in lieu of full comprehension, itself a highly valuable skill in real-life scenarios.

## تمرين 5

Complete the following sentences with the most appropriate word(s) from the list below.

غدا - مكلف - نسولك - مقابلة - كاي يناسبني - اليوم - نشوفهم - الموعد - شركة - سيفطت

1. \_\_\_\_\_ الي اعطاني الأستاذ \_\_\_\_\_.
2. عند فيصل، عند اليوم \_\_\_\_\_ اليوم في واحد الشركة ديال التواصل.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ طلب باش تخدم في الجامعة.
4. ما عندي شَيّ الوقت باش نزور أصحابي \_\_\_\_\_.
5. غادي نمشي عند العائلة ديالي \_\_\_\_\_ باش \_\_\_\_\_.
6. اتصلت \_\_\_\_\_ ديال الكمبيوتر بوّام باش تخدم معهم \_\_\_\_\_.
7. بغيت \_\_\_\_\_ عافاك على الطريق منين نمشي للمدينة القديمة؟
8. شكّون عافاك الي \_\_\_\_\_ بالسكن ديال الطلاب.

## تمرين 6

Find out from your classmates:

- Who likes job interviews?
- Who watches interviews on TV?
- What is a suitable time to call them?
- Who is in charge of interviews at their job or selective “خاصّة” college?
- When do they see their friends?
- In which company would they like to work?

Figure 2. Sample of typical exercises (p. 104).

It is clear that in most cases this textbook has been designed with the goal of preparing students for meaningful interaction with Moroccan Arabic speakers in a variety of everyday and informal contexts. To this end, it emphasizes listening comprehension and speaking, and each chapter includes a number of discussion questions, role plays, and group activities that foster communicative competence. The central role that these exercises play in activating new vocabulary and grammatical concepts means that the book is particularly well-suited for classroom contexts, in which students can reinforce one another's knowledge while practicing oral language production. Self-directed learners will likely find the book less appealing and its exercises less relevant. There have nonetheless been some attempts to accommodate them, such as a *check* feature for listening texts on the DVD that allows students to verify whether they have heard a given vocabulary item correctly; in reality, however, such features do little to assist the independent learner while complicating an instructor's ability to discern students' comprehension from assigned homework. Within the classroom setting, the textbook is most appropriate for beginning or intermediate learners who are also enrolled in an MSA course. Advanced Arabic learners who have knowledge of MSA or other dialects will likely find the grammar and vocabulary repetitive, and an instructor who chooses to use the book will need to supplement its content with other materials.

Chekayri's *An Introduction to Moroccan Arabic and Culture* clearly fills a previous gap in Moroccan Arabic instructional resources, differing from other offerings in a number of ways. It inarguably makes the most sophisticated use of a technology component, and is the only MA resource to currently offer video and interactive features on a DVD. It is likewise the only textbook that has been explicitly designed to be used simultaneously alongside instruction in Modern Standard Arabic, to which most students in traditional Arabic programs will have exposure. Students who use the book will benefit both from exercises accompanied by high-quality multimedia elements and from in-class communicative activities that have been designed with real-life language production tasks in mind. At the same time, a number of technological and methodological idiosyncrasies leave room for improvements should a second edition be pursued in the future. Still, the book remains the best current offering for students in most traditional classroom-based Arabic programs. At a list price of \$59.95, it is more expensive than other resources for learning MA, but the difference in the quality and quantity of the materials makes the textbook worth its cost.

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## ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Mike Turner is a graduate student in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, where he studies the Arabic and Amazigh (Berber) language varieties of the modern-day Maghreb. He is interested in language contact, sociolinguistics, and teaching spoken dialects to second-language learners.

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