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## **LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IN THE CONTEXT OF TRANSIT MIGRATION**

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This paper is an exploratory qualitative study of the acquisition of Moroccan Arabic by four illegal transit migrants in Rabat. These migrants come from Senegal, Congo, Cameroon and Ghana. They speak different mother tongues but three of them speak French as a second language while the Ghanaian speaks English. The paper tries to focus on the micro level of individual experiences as well as on the meso level of migrant organizations and the macro level of language ideologies. The informants have been found to draw on various linguistic and non-linguistic resources to achieve understanding of the multilingual sociolinguistic situation of the host society and to try to establish communication with its members.

**Keywords:** transit migration, Moroccan Arabic, DFG, SLA

### **1. Introduction**

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) tends to focus mainly on language learners in the context of formal instruction. This practice seems to be justified by a number of reasons, but two practical reasons stand as the most prominent among them. The first relates to the concerns of those connected to the domain of education, including teachers, officials and other stakeholders. These wrestle on a daily basis with issues of promoting and speeding language learning in schools and universities in order to enable students to master linguistic means of accessing and transmitting knowledge. The second relates to researchers themselves,

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who tend to choose the easiest way to access subjects and collect data for testing their hypotheses and building theoretical models. Quite understandably, university students form the population most targeted by SLA researchers. Together, these two factors have substantially contributed to an understanding of instructed language learning that is far deeper than any other modality of language learning.

But this heavy focus on formal language learning has undoubtedly resulted in discarding a number of variables which could have shed more light on the linguistic-cognitive and the social aspects of the learning process. Bigelow and Taronne (2004), for example, draw attention to the potential role of literacy in SLA. They note in this respect that none of the studies published in *TESOL Quarterly* during the preceding 10 years documents the SLA processes of adult illiterate learners. As a consequence of this neglect of the role of literacy, not much is known about how illiterate migrants, for example, acquire a second language in formal or informal contexts. Bigelow and Taronne (2004) suspect that L1 literacy may affect not only literacy in L2, but also the oral/aural skills in the target language. In brief, findings of studies on literate learners may not be easily extendable to illiterate learners.

The situation does not seem to have changed much since Bigelow and Taronne (2004) first raised the problem. After a perusal of three flagship SLA journals, Ortega (2019) notes a continuing focus on undergraduate students in SLA research while “[g]rassroots multilingualism and the multilingualism of marginalized and minoritized communities rarely makes it into SLA pages” (p. 32). Ortega does acknowledge the importance of investigating instructed second or foreign language learning, given the large number of international students, which amounted to about 4.5 million in 2015, but she points out that the number of international migrants worldwide is even larger, amounting to 258 millions in 2017. Many of these migrants have to pick up the dominant language of their host society if they are to integrate that society to any extent. Given that not much research has been devoted to the linguistic-cognitive processes of informal second language acquisition, it is not clear how SLA research could benefit this large population of migrants.

It must be granted, however, that a number of studies have already been carried out on language learning by adult migrants. Block (2007) reviews some of these studies, although with a particular attention to the identity issue to which we will return later on. In the light of the findings of these studies, Block questions a number of assumptions made in SLA literature. One such assumption is that “naturalistic contexts provide learners with more opportunities to be exposed to T[arget] L[anguage] input

than other contexts (e.g. foreign language contexts)" p. 77. That is to say, living among speakers of TL will encourage the language learner to practice TL on a daily basis and, ultimately, enable them to become proficient in the language. Many informants, however, reported that they rarely had the chance to interact with natives, and when they did, the onus was often on the migrant rather than on the native speaker to make communication successful. In other words, it is usually up to the migrant to get his message across by any means possible, and if he cannot, the native hearer will simply end the communication. Obviously, the social context in which adult language learning takes place is of tremendous importance to an understanding of the often-made remark about the low proficiency adult migrants tend to achieve in TL.

But if social context is crucial to adult language learning by settled migrants, it is even more crucial in the case of transit migrants. By transit migrants we refer to those migrants who find themselves caught in a place mid-way between their country of origin and the destination they intend to reach. In North African countries, for example, large numbers of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa are forced to stay for long periods, waiting for an opportunity to cross the Mediterranean. Because of their illegal status, their exact number cannot be documented, although various estimations have been advanced. In Morocco alone, their number is estimated between 25,000 and 40,000, and when the Moroccan authorities offered to regularize their status, some 20,000 showed up. But given the low economy and the limited job market of North African countries, even legal migrants are unlikely to find job opportunities that would provide them with the decent life they had dreamt of when they first embarked on their hazardous journey. Therefore, they have neither the opportunity nor probably the will to settle in these countries.

Developments during the last decade have brought the issue of migration to the forefront of international politics under a strong media pressure. The large waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa raised concerns in Western countries, especially in view of the demographic impact these refugees could have and the inhumane conditions of their journeys. In response to this embarrassing situation, Western countries started to negotiate agreements with countries on their borders to stop migrants before reaching their destination. This is the case of the European Union with Morocco and other countries on the Mediterranean side. Such agreements have created a situation in which transit migrants are 'stuck', unable to reach their destination or to return home. In a census undertaken by MFP (2010), 64% of 624 migrants reported having been in Morocco for 1-5 years and 9% for more than 5 years.

Given that security measures have become tighter, it is very likely that migrants will remain in the country for longer and undetermined periods. In view of this situation, some scholars argue against the term "transit" on the ground that it reflects a view of transit migration as temporary and, consequently, exempts the concerned governments from any responsibility toward transit migrants. For this reason, Stock (2013) suggests "forced immobility" as a better term to describe this new situation. (For similar proposals, see Alioua 2011; Escoffier 2006; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008, among others).

These circumstances create a special situation which may be of some interest to SLA. More specifically, a number of questions pop out in relation to the way transit migrants communicate with people in the countries in which they are forced to live. Some of these questions are as follows: A) How do transit migrants communicate among themselves when they do not have any language in common? B) How do they communicate with members of the communities they temporarily live with? C) What kind of identity do they develop in transit migration contexts? D) Do they show any degree of motivation to learn the language of these communities? E) What effect does their status in transit communities have on their (non)learning of the language of the host country? Because the population of transit migrants has not received enough attention from SLA researchers, not much is known about how they develop strategies of communication, linguistic or other, within what we will call a transit society. This exploratory study aims at developing awareness of the importance of investigating language acquisition by this population.

This paper will be constituted of three main sections, in addition to the present introduction and a conclusion. Section 2 will present briefly the theoretical framework in which the study will be couched, namely, the model advanced by DFG (2016) and illustrated further in Section 3 in relation to transit migration. Finally, Section 4 will consider four cases of transit migrants from different sub-Saharan African countries living in Rabat, Morocco, and discuss how their acquisition, or lack thereof, of the Moroccan variety of Arabic reflects their transit identities.

## **2. A Model of Second Language Acquisition**

For an important part of SLA history, second language learning was considered a basically linguistic-cognitive process. This should not come as a big surprise given that, like other types of leaning, language learning was assumed to involve essentially mental structures and processes. That is to say, for SLA researchers working within

this paradigm, the main problem is to identify the cognitive factors that facilitate or hinder the acquisition of L2 structures. Examples of such factors include the processing, the storage and the retrieval of information, the development of cognitive faculties favoring or disfavoring the learning process and, for educational purposes, the design of appropriate activities and syllabi that would foster learning skills and strategies. In relation to L2 acquisition, the problem is to identify the cognitive factors involved in the acquisition of the TL grammatical system. These include the ability to identify patterns in phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, as well as the skill to produce these patterns correctly and automatically when needed for communication in TL. Among the linguistic-cognitive factors that hinder the attainment of these objectives are limited and/or unstructured input, memory deficiency and interference of L1 grammar. Obviously, this tradition in SLA has contributed a lot to the development of the field as well as to teaching practices.

But some of the assumptions on which this tradition stands have gradually been questioned. Among these is the assumption that knowledge is basically cognitive in nature. Within linguistics, language is conceived as a computational system that should be kept apart both from its use and from other knowledge structures. More precisely, language acquisition is claimed to involve the activation of an innate, arguably genetic, linguistic faculty that is distinct from other cognitive faculties and that determines in part, but is not determined by, how language is used in context. In reaction to this structuralist position, Hymes (1972) argues that knowledge of language is basically knowledge to use appropriate expressions to achieve communicative goals and, more than that, this knowledge cannot develop outside the context of a speech community. From this point of view, language acquisition is just one aspect of the socialization process which an individual has to undergo before becoming a full member of a community. A major implication of this argument is that language acquisition does not involve linguistic-cognitive structures only, but social factors as well.

The social factors involved in language learning do not include only the knowledge of what to say to whom when and where, but also the emotional experiences that accompany action in the TL community and interaction with its members. The nature of the relation between emotion and cognition is, to say the least, ambiguous and it is not totally clear whether emotion is part of cognition or not. Boden (2006) reports that early cognitive scientists (e.g. Miller, Gallanter and Pribram, 1960) considered issues related to emotion, but these aspects were soon relegated to a secondary position as cognition took over. According to Swain (2013), this attitude

can be accounted for by the inferior position in which emotions are placed in Western thought (and many other cultures), in comparison with reason. Emotion is claimed to be "more primitive" and "less intelligent" and can even be dangerous if it is not controlled by reason. But in reality, cognition cannot be isolated from emotions; these can either encourage or inhibit learning. In SLA, factors such as motivation, attitudes and affect have long been recognized to impact foreign language learning (cf. Gardner 1985). Influential constructs in this area of research include, among others, "instrumental" and "integrative" motivation. Learners with instrumental motivation are claimed to be more interested in achieving goals related to their job or study careers than in attaining a native-like command of a TL, whereas those with integrative motivation aim at integrating the TL community and, to that end, strive to speak TL like its native speakers. In short, the amount and the speed of language learning cannot be fathomed on the basis of cognitive factors only, without reference to the social context of learning and the degree of emotional investment in it.

However, as formulated in the preceding passage, this critique does not constitute a damaging argument against the cognitive approach to SLA. Within this approach, the social and affective factors are not denied any role in the learning process, but they are rather considered as performance phenomena that interact with, but nonetheless can be isolated from, the cognitive aspect of learning. As explained by Dougherty and Long (2003, p. 4):

Performance data are inevitably the researchers' mainstay, but understanding underlying competence, not the external verbal behavior that depends on that competence, is the ultimate goal.

To put it differently, the object of study in SLA is the development of the TL system (i.e. the code) from point zero, where there is no knowledge, to the final stage where full knowledge of that code has been attained. From this perspective, "research in SLA is [...] viewed as a branch of cognitive science" (Dougherty and Long 2003, p. 4). It is probably for this reason that this conception is often described as "cognitivist" (cf. Atkinson, 2011a). It is not our purpose here to evaluate the cognitivist approach or to compare it with alternative approaches; others have amply dealt with that (cf. Atkinson 2011b). However, we would like to point out that an SLA with applied orientations cannot afford to ignore non-cognitive factors; these have a significant impact on the learning process and can either speed or impede it. Therefore, for SLA to provide the necessary knowledge to help L2 learners, a more comprehensive approach is needed, and that is what DGF (2016) attempts to do.

The framework defended in DFG (2016) was developed by a group of researchers working within different fields, but all sharing similar orientations and conceptions of SLA. One point in common between them is their strong applied orientation, as reflected in the objectives they set for SLA research. One of these objectives is:

to serve as a platform for the development of practical, innovative, and sustainable solutions that are responsive to the challenges of language teaching and learning in our increasingly networked, technologized, and mobile world and [...] to improve communication with a wider range of audiences, especially any and all stakeholders that SLA investigates or whom it hopes to benefit, so that they can use SLA work to improve their material and social conditions. p. 20

As a consequence of this stance, they view SLA as a trans-disciplinary field, bringing together contributions from various intellectual endeavors to elucidate different aspects of L2 development in different contexts by different groups and individuals. To this end, they reject all unsupported assumptions and theoretical allegiances that restrict or orient SLA research toward specific issues at the expense of others. Some of these assumptions include the idea that language faculty is distinct from other cognitive faculties, that L1 acquisition is qualitatively different from L2 learning, that language forms a hermetically sealed system or that knowledge is representational. The DFG express reservations about these and similar claims which form the basis of the cognitivist approach.

In their attempt to develop a trans-disciplinary model for SLA, DFG (2016) identify three major levels which mutually affect the SLA process. This process starts with individual learners at the micro level. An understanding of this level must focus, among other things, on learners' experiences with TL as they try to integrate the TL community or achieve other goals by means of TL. These individual experiences have cognitive, emotional and social aspects, and a learner's achievement is necessarily the result of the interaction between all these aspects. But society is not a mere aggregate of individuals; it is also constituted of social groups such as the family, the neighborhood, and similar socio-cultural institutions. L2 learning cannot escape the influence of these institutions in as much as individual behavior is constrained by group membership. In other words, L2 learning is multi-dimensional in the sense that learners have various objectives: to communicate by means of TL, but also to identify with a particular group using TL or a particular variety of it, to exploit or manipulate specific linguistic features to express their social stances or negotiate power relations, etc.; in short, to engage with the prevalent ideologies. Within the DFG framework,

such ideologies are positioned at the macro level. They include belief systems, cultural, political, religious and other values. Some of these beliefs and values may be inherited from the past, but they all support and are supported by the dominant groups and the institutions representing them. As conceived by DFG (2016), a comprehensive approach to SLA must integrate the three levels because focus on a single level can only draw an incomplete picture of the complex L2 learning process.

In relation with this conception of SLA as involving the interaction between three levels, DFG (2016) also present ten themes which “obtain from the characteristics of the three levels, their interconnectedness, and their potential as affordances” p. 26. For fear of dwelling too long on theoretical matters, some of these themes will be discussed in the following section in relation with transit migrants in Morocco.

### **3. The DFG model and transit migration**

As has just been expounded, the DFG model attempts to draw a global picture of SLA by bringing together three levels of analysis: the macro level of values and belief systems, the micro level of individuals engaging with members of TL community in various social activities, and the meso level of socio-cultural groups and institutions. The world of transit migrants in Morocco will be approached through a discussion of these levels in the order just presented for reasons we believe are most optimal for exposition.

One of the most crucial facts that sub-Saharan migrants face when they arrive in Morocco is multilingualism. Two major languages are spoken natively by the population: Arabic and Amazigh. But the two labels actually stand for very complex realities (cf. Author 2019). In the case of Amazigh (also known as Berber), three varieties or dialect groups are generally identified by the population: Tarifit in the north, Tamazight in the centre, and Tashlhyt in the south, although they in fact form a continuum. Up till recently, the language was used for conversation and oral culture only and was not recognized by official institutions. But Amazigh activists have managed to force the authorities to introduce it gradually in state institutions such as schools and government media and, since 2011, as a second official language of the country, besides Arabic. However, this newly gained status has not contributed much to a wider use of the language, which continues to be used only at home by Berbers. For this reason, it is highly improbable that any sub-Saharan migrant will ever think seriously to engage in learning it, especially in areas where Arabic is the dominant language.



In comparison, Arabic has enjoyed the status of an official language since the independence of Morocco in 1965. Even before that, Arabic had been the language of literate culture for centuries since the Arab conquest in the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. But given this long period, the language has evolved into a diglossic situation in which two varieties are used side by side for different functions (cf. Ferguson 1959). The colloquial is used basically for oral purposes while the standard, which is spoken natively by no one, is used for reading and writing. Though the two varieties are related, they are distant enough to hinder understanding of the standard by speakers who have not been initiated to it through formal education. Dialects of the colloquial, however, are fairly intelligible for Arabic-speaking Moroccans, though regional and social variations are abundant. For this reason, migrants are likely to find colloquial Arabic (i.e. MA) more practical than standard Arabic.

International languages are also used in Morocco, and some of them even have a high symbolic capital. Most prominent among these languages is undoubtedly French, the language of the former colonizer. French is widely used in schools, media and administration, and is highly valued by the better-off classes and the educated in general. As a consequence, speakers from this background can hardly avoid Arabic-French code-switching, if they ever try. Spanish is also widely used, though to a lesser extent, particularly in regions formerly colonized by Spain. As to English, it has gained substantial ground as a language of international communication, science and technology though, up till now, it is taught only as a school subject starting from high school (for more on multilingualism in Morocco, see Ennaji 2005). Besides English and French, other languages such as German, Italian, Chinese and others are also taught as subjects, particularly at universities (cf. Eddakhch and Bensoukas, forthcoming).

After this brief presentation of the macro sociolinguistic scene in Morocco, the main issue to discuss now is how attitudes toward the different languages affect sub-Saharan migrants' choices and trajectories of L2 learning. Another related, and perhaps more basic, question is how these migrants become aware of the beliefs about and the values of each variety. Unfortunately, given the complexity of sub-Saharan migration and our poor knowledge of it, we can only approach the issue speculatively. In this respect, we can conjecture that migrants with some education will use accessible resources to get informed about the linguistic, the political and the economic situation not only in Morocco, but also in other countries they plan to cross. This seems to be a necessary part of any adventure as gigantic as travelling illegally across many countries, often taking risky roundabout routes and with little means. Some of this

information may already be available as common knowledge in countries where some migrants originate from, as is probably the case in West African countries with which Morocco has had relations for centuries. On the whole, migrants are likely to gather information about the countries they plan to cross, though little is known about how this information is collected and shared and, much less, how it is used for purposes such as communication in transit communities (cf. Alioua 2011; Alpes 2011; Escoffier 2006; Shapendonk 2011; Stock 2013).

It should be pointed out that many of the prevalent linguistic ideologies will be transmitted, implicitly or explicitly, by the very sources which migrants may use to get informed about a country. For example, Wikipedia, an easy source that migrants are most likely to consult, states in a short section dedicated to Morocco's languages that up to about 32% of Moroccans speak French and that it "is widely used in governmental institutions, media, mid-size and large companies, international commerce with French-speaking countries, and often in international diplomacy". In comparison, only some 4.5% speak Spanish, mainly in northern Morocco and "Spanish Sahara" (sic) while English is "far behind French in terms of speakers". This implies that French occupies a special status among foreign languages spoken in the country and this status would constitute a symbolic capital for migrants who have some mastery of the language. Indeed, and as will be seen later, some of our informants stated explicitly that they prefer to speak French rather than MA with Moroccans.

In relation to the native languages, the same entry draws a clear distinction between the status of Arabic and Berber in terms of the number of speakers. Specifically, it reports that 89.8% of the whole population can communicate in MA while only 28% speak Berber. Obviously, these figures indicate that MA is the majority language, a fact that is reinforced by the areal distribution of the two languages illustrated by the linguistic map in the same entry. A final remark at the end of the section states further that standard Arabic and French are "the main languages of administration and education", thus indicating that Berber has a low status. However, migrants arriving in the country will soon realize that the Moroccan variety of Arabic is significantly divergent from standard Arabic and, besides that, the colloquial variety is limited to everyday informal use. How this sociolinguistic status will affect migrants' motivation to learn MA is not clear, but it seems that it will depend on other factors such as time of residence and a migrant's relation with the transit community. What should be kept in mind is that although MA is basically a vernacular, it is the most

widely used means of communication in the country and, consequently, its communicative function balances its non-standard status.

For uneducated migrants, however, a lot of questions related to their understanding of transit society are still pending. For example, how could a stranger discover that the inhabitants of a capital city like Rabat are structured into social strata and that each stratum may have different linguistic preferences and practices? After all, this issue may be intellectually challenging even for a native sociolinguist, let alone a stranger. Understanding a foreign society goes well beyond noticing observable similarities and differences to interpreting what those similarities and differences mean for its members. To this end, a foreign observer must be equipped with minimum knowledge in the absence of which others' behavior would often be complete mystery (cf. Schutz 1964). The same remark holds also for members of the transit community in relation to sub-Saharan migrants. We experienced a lot of difficulty understanding how these migrants in Rabat formed groups, how they gathered and dispersed, sometimes suddenly, their reluctance to engage in communication with us, etc. Without some means of communication, our different worlds seemed completely sealed to each other. This remark brings us straight to the micro level of L2 acquisition in the context of transit migration.

According to DFG (2016, p. 24), "L2 learning is a process that begins at the micro level of social activity [...], with individuals recruiting their neurological mechanisms and cognitive and emotional capacities and engaging with others in specific multilingual contexts of action and interaction, resulting in recurrent contexts of use". These contexts will supposedly provide the learner with cues and patterns that contribute to the development of multilingual repertoires. Within the context of instructed L2 learning, the instructor would usually simulate contexts to help the learner not only to assimilate the linguistic expressions required for the purposes of an interaction (e.g. introducing oneself to others), but also the cultural meanings of the interaction as a socially recognized event. In this way, L2 instruction serves as a bridge between the learner's original world and the world of the TL community. In natural L2 learning, however, learners are often left to their own devices; they have to create some common ground, for both expression and interpretation, between themselves and the host community. In other words, they need both to understand the others and help the others understand them by whatever means available. L2 learning can only be understood as part of this endeavor and not merely as an internalization of a linguistic system (cf. Atkinson et al. 2007). The question that

should be tackled relates to the means and the strategies generally deployed by strangers, e.g. migrants, to approach the community they want, by choice or by force, to explore. A stranger's primary concern is to communicate his intentions to others by ways of different types and modalities, and the trajectory of L2 learning is determined to some degree by the interaction of these types and modalities of communication.

The objective of human communication is not only to impart information about the world, but also to share with others one's emotions, stances, attitudes, etc.; in brief, one's subjectivity. The problem is that it is not clear how symbolic means of expression stand for contents of others' minds or, indeed, whether others have minds in the first place (cf. Avramides 2001; Zahavi 2014). For common-sense, however, this philosophical problem never arises and interactants simply assume that others are like themselves: they experience the world in almost the same way as they do and that symbols – linguistic or other – stand for parts of that experience (cf. Schutz 1953; Doherty 2009). It is this assumed intersubjectivity that provides a significant common ground for communication even in the absence of a common language, provided there is enough motivation to communicate. Research in developmental psychology indicates that children go through different stages before they develop an intersubjective mind, and it seems that many aspects of this development are innate (cf. Zlatev & Andr n 2009; Zlatev 2014). As to adult learners such as migrants, they are most likely to deploy all their innate and acquired capacities to share subjective experiences with members of a foreign community. However, although DFG (2016) makes reference to these capacities, it seems that not much has been done in the way of understanding how already acquired strategies of intersubjectivity contribute to L2 development.

Another related theme stressed by DFG (2016) is the multi-modal nature of L2 acquisition. This means in part that L2 items are never presented to the learner in isolation, but are often packaged with other verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources which serve as cues that "make transparent the form-meaning patterns and can assist L2 learners in noticing and remembering them" p. 29. As a matter of fact, in every act of communication, information does not come in the form of discrete linguistic items only, but includes also supra-segmentals (e.g. stress, intonation, pause, voice quality, etc.) and non-verbal signs (e.g. facial expressions, gestures, etc.) which typically accompany them. If we assume that linguistic items function in a qualitatively different manner from the other semiotic resources, as cognitivists do, the challenge for L2 learners would be to extract from the package patterns of discrete linguistic items and

the meaning associated with them and, eventually, abstract a grammar governing the organization of those items. But there is a growing conviction that language is inextricably linked to non-linguistic means of communication, both in production and comprehension (cf. McNeill 1992, 2005, 2016). For example, in a review of neurolinguistic studies on the processing of semantic information from speech and the accompanying gestures, Özyürek (2014, p. 8) concludes that “it is becoming increasingly clear that visible meanings, the iconically motivated form-meaning mappings available through the affordances of our body for communicative expression, are an integral aspect of our language faculty”. Similarly, studies in L1 acquisition have shown that gestures predate language development and continue to be an inextricable part of the learning process (cf. Gullberg and de Bot 2010; Özçalışkan and Golden-Meadow 2005; Rowe and Golden-Meadow 2009; for a review, see Golden-Meadow 2014).

Unfortunately, research on the role of gestures and other semiotic resources in L2 acquisition is only in its initial stage (cf. Atkinson et al. 2007). In natural L2 acquisition, in particular, such research can only be promising. In the case of migrants, gestures and facial expressions are likely to be appealed to in initial attempts to establish contact with members of the host community and may continue to scaffold the learning process for a long period. In cases in which learners, for whatever reasons, fail to progress, non-linguistic means of communication will form an integral part of their semiotic system of interaction with the native users of TL. Although we did not manage to collect videotaped data in this exploratory study and, consequently, had no possibility to analyze our informants’ body language as they were interviewed, we were struck in retrospect by the wide discrepancy between the impoverished transcribed speech of some of them and the ease with which the interviewer managed to get what the informants intended<sup>3</sup>. Obviously, the interviewer must have had enough non-linguistic clues to interpret an informant’s speech in a way that did not interrupt the flow of conversation repeatedly. Therefore, we call for more research on the role of non-linguistic means of communication, e.g. gestures, in the process of L2 learning in line with similar research already available on L1 development and L1 use in general.

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<sup>3</sup> One such example is the following utterance produced by the Ghanaian informant: “*ana kan hna hasan tani*”, which can be translated literally as: me he-was here Hassan II. The interviewer understood the message without much effort as meaning that the informant had been in Morocco since the reign of late Hassan II.

The third level that DFG (2016) identify is the meso level of socio-cultural institutions and communities. As noted earlier, sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco are mostly in a transit situation waiting for the opportunity to cross to Europe. For a long period, they used to stay in ghettos/camps near Oujda (on the Algerian border) or in the forest near Belyounech (on the Mediterranean coast), and from there, they organized illegal entering to the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta or crossing to the Spanish mainland. It was probably for this reason that they did not develop visible representative organizations to mediate between them and the authorities and/or the local communities. But after the recurrent dismantling of those camps by Moroccan authorities, more and more sub-Saharan migrants moved to Casablanca or Rabat, where UNHCR and other international and local organizations are based. It is within these two cities that most migrants have probably been concentrated during the last decade (cf. Stock 2013). Unlike the ghettos, where contact with Moroccans was not very frequent, such contact cannot be avoided in the city and, consequently, more sophisticated organizations are required to face new challenges.

Unfortunately, our knowledge of migrant organizations in transit countries is relatively poor. Most studies on sub-Saharan migration are interested in its push-pull factors, organizing networks, the routes frequently taken and similar aspects which may be of interest to those involved in combating the phenomenon more than migrants' social life in the transit society (cf. Alioua 2011; Alpes 2011; Escoffier 2006; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula 2008; Shapendonk 2011). An exception to this statement is Stock (2013), who tries to adopt the migrants' point of view as she reports their lives under circumstances she describes as "forced immobility". Stock identifies two major types of migrant communities: what migrants themselves call "government" and the church. The "government" is already known from previous studies and this refers to organizations based essentially on national affiliation. In Morocco, as in different camps along the migration routes, Nigerian, Congolese, Cameroonian, Senegalese and other "governments" are organized around a "chairman/chairwoman" to coordinate efforts and share resources to bring the "adventure" to a happy ending. In Rabat, Stock mentions also the various churches in which migrants meet not only for religious service, but also to organize themselves in order to face dangers against which an individual would be helpless. Like "governments", the churches are also based on nationalities. Similar Muslim organizations have not been reported.

There are many reasons why these organizations should be limited mainly to compatriots. One reason concerns identity: in an unfamiliar and hostile environment,

a migrant seeks any familiar sign that can help him/her put together the bits and pieces of his shattered self. Previous ethnographic studies have all pointed out the close relationships between travelling companions – “fellow travelers”, “fellow adventurers”, “route companions” – but it seems that once the journey comes to an end, though not the ultimate one, other things in common become more prominent. One of these things is a common language. Earlier on, we raised a question concerning communication between migrants from different linguistic backgrounds and it seems that this issue puts limits on the way communities could be formed. Stock (2013, p. 173) reports that “[m]ost churches are almost exclusively frequented by members of the same nationality”; when she asked a pastor of a Nigerian Pentecostal church in Rabat, for example, why most of the church members were Nigerian, he responded that they could speak English and/or pidgin. A Ghanaian informant who also frequented the same church explained that it was mainly because he could speak pidgin to Nigerians and that “he did not feel like going to one of the francophone Pentecostal churches because of problems with language” p. 137. In view of these data, we can only call for more research on the role of national and international languages not only in serving as a means of communication between transit migrants, but also in structuring their social organizations.

Another issue that is of more relevance to the purposes of this paper is how migrant communities interact with and act on the belief systems and ideologies identified at the macro level. In the course of this action and interaction, these communities are likely to serve as clubs for informing, discussing, evaluating, debating and selecting the most optimal means of communication with the transit community. In this context, competent migrants could gain more status if they can mediate between the migrant and the host communities becoming, thus, special agents in the formulation and the transmission of the TL linguistic ideologies. Unfortunately, neither the extant literature nor our data shed any light on this issue. All we can do is direct future research to its relevance both to SLA and to the situation of migrants in transit communities such as Morocco and other North African countries. As was pointed earlier, sub-Saharan migrants are spending more and more time in these countries due to the stringent security measures imposed by the European Union, often in agreement with the regional governments. Under these circumstances, it is not clear how these migrants plan to lead their lives in the countries they are blocked in and how this undesired situation will affect their motivation to learn local languages.

After this general discussion of the DFG approach to L2 learning by transit migrants in Morocco, we will now narrow our focus by presenting four cases of sub-Saharan migrants in Rabat. The objective is to illustrate the points made above by reference to more concrete cases of migrants attempting to integrate the transit community either by learning MA or through other linguistic means they deem appropriate.

#### **4. Four cases of transit migrants**

In this exploratory study, data were collected from four informants. Finding voluntary participants among sub-Saharan migrants turned out to be more difficult than we had expected. Migrants were particularly cautious to engage in an interview of whose nature and objectives they were unaware or did not want to believe. Although some of the people we approached showed some interest, they refused to be recorded. This reluctance is probably an indication of their fear of anyone who might be suspect of having connections with the authorities.

The four informants who volunteered, though hesitatingly, to be interviewed were from different nationalities. One of them was from Senegal and will henceforth be referred to as Suleiman in reference to his Islamic religion. He was a 32-year old man and held a shop for repairing mobile phones. His mother tongue was Wolof but had also a fairly good knowledge of French. The second informant was a 35-year old Congolese and held a shop for selling mobile phones. He spoke Lingala as a mother tongue and showed also some mastery of French. For ease of reference, he will be called Keith. The third informant (37-years old) came from Cameroon. He had Bamum as a mother tongue and, like the first two, he also spoke French. But unlike the other two, he had no shop and offered second-hand mobile phones for sale on the street. He will be called Cooper. The last participant came from Ghana. He was 41. His native language was Akan and, unlike the other informants, he had learnt English as a second language. He was a shoemaker and offered his services on the street. He will be referred to as Gabriel. Unlike the Senegalese informant, the other three were Christians, as their names were deliberately chosen to suggest. The four participants were interviewed at their place of work and, for this reason, the interviews were relatively brief (between 20 and 35 minutes). They were given a form to sign and were promised confidentiality.

All the four migrants were planning to cross to Europe but had to work out new plans for their life in the transit society. At the time they were interviewed, they had



been staying in Morocco for a fairly long period of time. More specifically, Suleiman, the Senegalese, had stayed for 2 years; Cooper, the Congolese for 5; Keith, the Cameroonian, for 8; and Gabriel, the Ghanaian, for 18. Given their different periods of stay, we would expect them to show different degrees of mastery of MA, with the one with the longest period being the most proficient. But it turns out that other factors had more weight than the time of stay among MA native speakers. According to our subjective evaluation, Suleiman was the most proficient of the four and Gabriel the least, though the former had spent only 2 years in the country and the latter 18. On his part, Keith (8 years) exhibited a better speaking competence than Cooper (5 years), but definitely less than Suleiman. This fact calls for a careful examination of the social life of the informants in search for a possible explanation.

It should be noted that the four informants showed different identity strategies to accommodate themselves to their situation characterized by "forced immobility". A comparison between Suleiman and Gabriel could illustrate the point. The two had taken different routes before they arrived in Morocco: while Suleiman took a direct flight, Gabriel had to cross five countries by different but less comfortable means of transport. Once there, Gabriel roamed the country from north to south vainly in search for an opportunity to cross to Europe, usually enduring various ordeals, before finally settling in Rabat in 2015. He worked only illegally in the street and, because of that, he was usually subject to police harassment. In comparison, Suleiman managed to rent a shop as a phone technician in a very busy market. Besides, he was a Muslim who participated in daily prayers with other shopkeepers, a fact that gained him some respect among them. Gabriel, being non-Muslim, did not have such an opportunity to integrate the community and, thus, had less chance to interact with native speakers. These and other circumstances worked more in favor of Suleiman than in favor of Gabriel. Consequently, the Senegalese expressed satisfaction about the present and faith in the future. For him, "Senegal, Morocco [...], they are all the same"; in a moment of excitement, he even asserted that "I am Moroccan; I'm not Senegalese". It's not clear what effect he intended to produce by saying that, but everything about him indicated that he was happy with his new life. In comparison, Gabriel explained that he had not been able to adapt and that he wished to go back home some day and marry a Ghanaian woman. Some researchers (e.g. Stock 2012) have pointed out that migration is considered as self-realization and that migrants who do not manage to reach their ultimate goal are usually considered to be losers. Given that Gabriel failed to reach his goal in an 18-years period, he must have developed a low esteem of

himself. In the light of this unhappy experience, it is only natural that he should speak a pidginized MA.

But Gabriel was not unsociable. During the interview at his work place, some of his customers stopped to greet him or to chat about football, of which he seemed to be a devoted fan. He even adopted an Arabic name, Ibrahim, most probably to avoid harassment by fanatics, if not to elicit sympathy. He showed good knowledge about the Moroccan society and its culture. For example, in a brief discussion about languages, he pointed out that Tarift is spoken in the north and that Tashlhyt is spoken in the south, two regions which he declared to have visited. However, he did not seem to be aware of Tamazight spoken in the Middle Atlas, probably because he had never been there. Besides, he considered the two as distinct languages; he did not seem to realize that these were considered as dialects of the Berber language. This is perhaps an indication that the information he had on the topic had been collected on the ground. As was pointed out in the previous section, only Berber activists tend to treat the three varieties as dialects of one and the same language. Concerning Arabic, he referred only to Darija (i.e. the colloquial), but because he traveled widely in the country, he showed awareness of dialectal variation. He even judged that the Arabic variety spoken in the far south, known as Hassaniya, did not differ much from Darija. Furthermore, in an attempt to explain the status of English in Ghana, he compared it to the status of French in Morocco, adding that one cannot speak either language in the two countries if s/he has never been to school. In brief, he seemed to be no different from the other informants as far as knowledge of Moroccan society and culture is concerned.

But there is one important skill Gabriel did not share with the others and that is knowledge of French. As was explained above, while the others came from francophone countries, he came from Ghana, where the major language was English. It is not clear what role this had on his communication with Moroccans, at least during the early period of his stay, but it seems that knowledge of French gives some advantage to francophone migrants since many Moroccans have the ability to interact by means of this language. We suppose that Suleiman, Keith and Cooper used it for some time as a scaffolding to learn MA. Even after they have picked the local language, they relied a lot on MA-French code-switching, probably because they were aware that the practice was widespread among Moroccans themselves. For example, when Keith, the Cameroonian, was asked about the number of years he had spent in Morocco, he answered first in MA, but having noticed that the interviewer did not get the answer,

he reiterated in French: "huit ans" (eight years). Immediately after that, the interviewer repeated the expression, first in French, then in MA. In retrospect, the interviewer (one of the authors) explained that his response was unplanned and that he did not know why he reiterated Keith's answer. This example provides a good illustration of how French could be used by francophone migrants to learn MA. On his part, Gabriel also used some French expressions which he probably picked up from Moroccan speakers but never switched to English. For instance, during the interview, he told one of the customers to come back in the afternoon to retrieve their shoes, and the expression he used was "après-midi" (afternoon). He even produced the sound corresponding to the letter "r" in a Parisian accent (viz. [χ]) instead of [r], much as highly educated or snobbish Moroccans would do! It is not obvious whether he was aware of the social significance of the standard and the non-standard pronunciations of "r", though all the informants as well as the migrants we have met showed full awareness of the high status of French in Morocco. As a case in point, one of Suleiman's acquaintances, also from Senegal, interrupted to explain that he did not need to learn MA simply because speaking French conferred him some respect among Moroccans.

Indeed, cases were recorded which indicated that migrants could detect the social significance of very subtle variations in the use of French among Moroccans. For instance, Cooper, the Congolese, realized the Arabic word [luɣa] (language) on a number of occasions as [lura] (replacing the velar fricative with an "r") though the interviewer stuck to the correct pronunciation. One possible interpretation of this deviance is to refer to variation in the pronunciation of French "r". As was hinted at in the previous paragraph, Moroccan speakers generally choose the standard pronunciation of this phoneme to claim good knowledge of French, which in turn implies belonging to high social strata, as opposed to low class speakers, who generally use the non-standard variant [r]. Apparently, Cooper mistook the Arabic word for a French one and replaced the [ɣ] with [r]. If this was indeed the case, the choice of the non-standard variant would be an attempt on the part of the speaker to adopt the low class practice concerning the pronunciation of this phoneme. This would not be surprising, given that migrants are more likely to come into contact with low class speakers than with high or middle class speakers, and it is natural that they would identify with the first group. However, if Cooper knew that "luɣa" was an Arabic word, he must have wrongly conjectured that the [ɣ]/[r] variation existed in MA as well and that the [r]-variant was associated with uneducated speakers and/or informality, just like in Moroccan French. In either case, this example indicates that interlanguage may

not constitute only a learner's approximation of the linguistic system of TL, but also an approximation of TL's sociolinguistic variation.

As a matter of fact, knowledge of sociolinguistic variation is only an aspect of communicative competence (cf. Geeslin and Long 2014). Other aspects include also the structure and the function of code-switching. In the case of a multilingual society like Morocco, a number of studies have shown that MA speakers exploit the status of the different codes to communicate a large array of social meanings (cf. Bentahila 1983; Ennaji 2005). Our informants, as has been mentioned above, also follow this practice and this is not limited to those among them who can speak French, but is attested also in data from Gabriel, who had no knowledge of that language. On the other hand, Gabriel never switched to English. Similarly, no informant ever let slip expressions from their mother tongues, most probably because they were aware that those languages were unlikely to be known anywhere apart from the areas in which they were spoken. Together, these facts point to the informants' awareness of the social status of each language within the Moroccan sociolinguistic scene as well as the significance switching to any of these languages would have. They also indicate that the speakers did have some control over their linguistic repertoire and that they selected only forms that suited the social context.

There are, however, linguistic aspects that seemed to escape their cognitive control. Some aspects of this failure are most probably due to the influence of L1, but these will not be discussed here since L1 transfer is too well-known to need attention in this paper. Instead, we will mention a case in which the phonetic input seems not to provide enough evidence for the underlying structure. This case concerns morphological gemination. In MA, one way of expressing definiteness is the gemination of the initial coronal sound of nouns. Similarly, verb Form II, which is the causative equivalent of Form I, is derived by the gemination of the middle consonant. In our data, all the informants failed to geminate nouns with initial coronals even when the context indicated that the definite form was intended, as in the example "*f-tiyara*" (in-plane) produced by Keith to refer to plane travel between Cameroon and Morocco. In MA, while nouns marked for definiteness may have a generic interpretation, indefinite nouns can only be read as specific. In this example, it is obvious that Keith did not intend a specific reading of the indefinite noun. Similarly, Gabriel produced "*sfər*"<sup>4</sup> (whistle) when he should have geminated the "f" sound. Actually, only Form II of this verb is used and no Form I of it is known in MA; therefore, Gabriel could not have

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<sup>4</sup> As it stands, this form corresponds to the color term meaning "yellow".

mistaken one for the other<sup>5</sup>. A possible explanation of these errors is that the phonetic realization of a geminate is perhaps not audible enough to set apart the different morphological forms. This would be quite expected if the informants were exposed to MA only in the busy markets and streets of Rabat, where all sorts of noise interfere with speech. If this is the case, the poor acquisition of the definite article and verb Form II would be due to the poverty of the input rather than to any cognitive-linguistic factor.

In addition to poverty of the input, other sociolinguistic factors may also interfere and, consequently, obscure the origin of apparent errors. The acquisition of the schwa vowel in MA is a case in point. The data recorded from our informants show that a schwa sometimes occurs where it should not (e.g. *'fəsla'* (in Salé)) or is incorrectly substituted by a full vowel (e.g. *'mayribi'* (Moroccan); *'genawa'* (Gnawa<sup>6</sup>)). These apparent errors may be explained by the influence of L1 phonotactic constraints. Indeed, the schwa vowel is attested in none of the languages spoken by our informants. These languages also do not allow consonant clusters, a fact that may explain the insertion of a vowel (see Ka 1988 for Wolof; Ward 1937 for Bamum; Meeuwis 2013 for Lingala; and Haugereid 2011 for Akan). There are, however, a number of objections to this explanation raised by the very errors recorded. In particular, what could explain the insertion of different vowels, as in the examples just cited, if their epenthesis has the same function, namely, to break consonant clusters? It seems that the phonological context alone cannot explain the quality of the inserted vowels.

Unlike the full vowels /i/, /u/ and /a/, the schwa in MA is unstable. At least in standard transcriptions, it occurs in different positions or deletes altogether, depending on the neighboring segments (*'ktəb'* (write); *'kətb-u'* (he wrote it)). Some linguists (e.g. Benhallam 1990) argue that the schwa is inserted to avoid illicit consonant clusters while others (e.g. Dell and Elmedlaoui 2002) maintain that the schwa in standard transcriptions "merely indicates that the *preceding consonant* is a syllable *onset*" p. 232 (emphasis in the original); in other words, its existence is a false impression. This disagreement is good evidence for the poverty of the input; i.e. the

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to morphological cases, instances of degemination were also recorded in which geminates had no morphological function. One such case is the name of the city of Marrakesh, which was realized by Cooper as [mrakʃ] when the correct pronunciation was [mærrakʃ]. Another case is "xərraz" (shoemaker) pronounced by Keith as [xraz], without the geminate. These examples indicate that the phenomenon is not limited to a specific class of words or to a category of speakers.

<sup>6</sup> An ethnic group of sub-Saharan origins found in Morocco and Algeria.

sound quality of the transition from the onset to the coda is not clearly audible (e.g. first syllable in *fəsla* "in Salé"), though our informants tend to interpret it as a schwa. Besides, in a number of cases, both forms with a schwa and a full vowel are attested, though with different sociolinguistic meanings. For example, while [məyriβi] is the expected form in everyday speech and is widely used even in formal contexts, [mayriβi] is rather formal because of its equivalence with the standard form. If we bear in mind that [mayriβi] was produced by the Senegalese informant, who had some knowledge of standard Arabic, the possibility that he was using that knowledge becomes obvious. Similarly, the form [genawa] produced by the Congolese informant does not necessarily indicate a lack of mastery of the MA phonotactics since this form corresponds to the French pronunciation of the name. Therefore, it is likely that the two speakers were actually using their multilingual competence to communicate various social meanings and, in the light of that, it would not be accurate to interpret the data only in cognitive-linguistic terms.

In brief, language acquisition in multilingual settings is likely to involve, besides the cognitive-linguistic factor, the interaction between exposure to TL, attitudes toward the TL community and the learner's experience of the interaction with its members, and ideologies about the languages used. Given the dominance of the cognitive-linguistic approach in SLA, a warning must be issued that errors made by learners may not result only from transfer, overgeneralization, rule simplification, fossilization or similar cognitive-linguistic factors, but may also indicate intended attempts to exploit aspects of the multilingual repertoire to communicate style shifts, stances or other social meanings. Of course, errors may also indicate failure to grasp the sociolinguistic function of linguistic items and structures.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, we have tried to draw attention to the importance of language learning in transit migration contexts to the field of SLA. In this respect, we have reported the results of an exploratory study on sub-Saharan migrants learning the Arabic vernacular spoken in Morocco, a country where they had been stuck for a number of years because of the preventative security measures taken by the EU in partnership with the Moroccan government. In this North African society characterized by multilingualism, sub-Saharan migrants are faced with the challenge not only of picking up the language in use, but also decoding the sociolinguistic landscape in order to be able to exploit their multilingual repertoire in an appropriate and efficient way.

In accordance with the social turn in SLA, we have argued that L2 data, including apparent errors, should be interpreted in the light of the complex use of language in multilingual settings rather than through a mere comparison between linguistic codes to determine the cognitive-linguistic processes relating known languages and TL. Further research is encouraged to elucidate the sociolinguistic strategies used by transit migrants to communicate with the TL community.

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