

The use of Arabic dialogue in Korandje and Berber stories

Across a wide band of northwestern Africa stretching at least from the Mediterranean coast of Morocco to the oases of western Algeria, folk tales in non-Arabic languages tend to contain insertions in Arabic. These may be particularly widespread for opening and closing formulae. In many cases, however, these are put into the mouth of particular characters within the story, typically taking the form of short “catchphrase” songs, or proverbs encapsulating the moral of the story. Skilled storytelling thus naturally involves code-switching at strategic moments. This usage has previously been described *passim* for Tarifiyt (Berber); in this presentation, it will be documented for Korandje (Northern Songhay) and Senhaja (Berber).

Such a practice raises a number of linguistically relevant questions. In terms of form, the language used in these phrases sometimes diverges strikingly from attested contemporary spoken Arabic; to what extent do these phrases remain grammatically analysable? Direct evidence on this point is scarce, but parallel attestations of switched vs. translated versions sometimes provide clues, as does the occasional embedding of matrix language islands within Arabic formulaic phrases. In terms of meaning, how does this practice affect the interpretation of the story? A priori, one might expect putting Arabic phrases in characters’ mouths to mark them as bilingual, but there is reason to suppose that bilingualism is itself an unmarked characteristic to be assumed by default for all characters. In both languages, this seems more likely to reflect wider social practice; characters switch to Arabic for songs and proverbs (not to mention greetings) because, in everyday life, speakers typically do the same. Despite the frequently unrealistic nature of these dialogues, and the artistic purposes of the use of these largely fixed phrases, language choice in reported speech in narratives thus appears to conform to the same principles as language choice in speech more generally. In both contexts, switching to Arabic helps to mark a phrase as mnemonic rather than spontaneous.