

Tamazight, a Berber Language

Guillermo Piñon relays a personal insight into the language of Morocco's Atlas Mountains

Recently, I received an email from a dear friend living with a Berber tribe in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco, which sparked my interest in this ancient language and its associated culture. According to Wikipedia, Berber “is a member of the Afroasiatic language family along with such languages as Arabic, Hebrew, Hausa, Ancient Egyptian, and Somali, and can be considered the ‘aboriginal language’ of North Africa, given that there is not evidence for a substratum predating or coexisting with Berber, and Berber has been present in the area since the first accounts.”

The Muslims who entered the Iberian peninsula (now Spain) in the 7th century were mainly Berbers from North Africa. They occupied vast regions of Spain for nearly eight centuries, until they were finally defeated by the Spanish Catholic rulers Isabel of Castille and Fernando II of Aragon.

The Moorish (Arab) influence on Spanish arts, architecture and language is a living example of the assimilation of cultures. The Spanish language is full of words that have their roots in this occupation. We all know that *loco* means crazy, but few of us realize that the word actually comes from Arabic *lawqa*, meaning fool.

If you live in a neighborhood with a large Hispanic population, you may have recently seen Halloween signs saying “*Calabazas* (pumpkins) for sale.” You probably did not know that the word comes from the Arabic *qerebat*, meaning wineskin. After buying and carrying one back home, you may have stopped by your local cafe (*qahwa*) and sweetened your favorite caffeinated beverage with *azúcar* (*sukkar*). Or, instead you may have chosen to drink your favorite tea with some *limón* (lemon, from Arabic *laymoon*, derived from Chinese *limung*).

Though Berber languages are not officially taught in schools in Morocco — instead kids learn Arabic — they are still widely spoken among villagers, so kids learn the languages

at home. This results in an interesting mix of dialects, which my friend had to learn simultaneously. These are some of the expressions Berber villagers used, with annotations she made on their meaning:

Inshallah: God willing. (Said after making any sorts of plans for the future. It’s a fatalistic phrase, meaning everything is up to God. Very useful when you don’t want to do something, like “I’ll come tomorrow to help you clean out your barn, *inshallah*.” Due to *inshallah*, the concept of “probably” does not exist. Think about that).

Allah yrhm lwaladin: May God bless your parents. (It means thank you).

Now, you may think that there is a strong Islamic influence in Berber and Arabic languages. And, although the influence is undeniable, we use the same type of phrases in English and Spanish and nobody presumes that we live in a strict religious state. We use them in Spanish, with “*Si Dios quiere*” and “*Dios te bendiga*,” both phrases which remind me of my grandmother, and I sincerely doubt she had any religious purpose when using them. She was just being polite. So, although the origin of words and phrases can be religious, people of all kinds still use them to show respect.

Other words and phrases that caught her attention while living in Morocco were:

Bezef: a lot. (If said in a long drawn out way with a large hand gesture, means a ton).

Shwiya: a little.

Kif kif: same same. (Accompanied by two index fingers rubbed next to each other).

Meshi kif kif: not the same. Means different.

Ihla: good, pretty, nice, smart, happy, healthy. (Yep, just one word).

Ixxa: bad, ugly, stupid, mean, sick. (Also one word).

Iqarf, *ihulemen*, *assameed*: cold. (Yes, like the Eskimos and their words for snow, up on the Moroccan mountains there are many words for many different types of cold).

Safi: enough. (Used quite often, in ways that make sense in Morocco but don’t really make sense in English, like at the end of conversations, when you understand what someone’s telling you, or when you refuse more tea).

*Boo*__: literally means master of __, but used to identify people. (*Bootemert*: master of the beard, guy with the beard. *Bootirbatin*: master of the ladies, ladies man. *Bootillesst*: master of darkness. *Boondada*: master of the glasses, guy with the glasses).

My friend sent me a list of things she found interesting while living with the Berber tribe, like children asking for pens all the time, or the lengths Berber men in her town went to avoid work. One unique aspect was concerning the daylight savings time change. In her own words, “Morocco decided to try out the time change, but it doesn’t quite work the same way as it does in America. Everyone is confused because new time and old time both exist and everyone just ends up two hours late for everything. Except for on my mountain, where they have not even heard of new and old time, and people laugh at you because time can’t change.”

Wise Berbers.

My friend’s experience with the Berber tribe was marked by the precarious economic conditions they lived in, the problems they have with pre- and post-natal care, and how the kids grow up being taught that Berber is a second-class language spoken only by the uneducated, though all the Berber children speak Berber in their homes.

I was struck by the fact that no matter how bad those economic and social conditions are, they remain bilingual (Berber and Arab) people. **X**

Guillermo Piñon, *Language Magazine’s* Study Abroad editor, collaborated with Jeanie Schuerman, a volunteer in rural Morocco, to produce this report.