Dubbing in Moroccan Arabic

or when sound engineers become sociolinguists

Jacopo Falchetta

Dubbing soap-operas in an uncodified language variety, such as Moroccan Arabic vernacular, raises the issue of which language norms should be followed in writing the scripts. Added to that, Moroccan dubbing professionals cannot resort to a single dialect variety that is unanimously recognised as the national 'standard dialect,' unlike e. g. their Egyptian colleagues who can rely on Cairene. Since 2009—when the first series dubbed in Moroccan Arabic was launched—this has presented the staff of Morocco's first dubbing studio, Plug-In, with the remarkable challenge of creating *dārīža* dialogues for foreign soap-operas while at the same time dealing with diatopic and diastratic linguistic variation. On the basis of direct observations and interviews carried out at the studios, this paper shows with which criteria this work of linguistic management is brought forth, and to what extent it can be compared to traditional processes of (e.g. European) language standardisation. First of all, several examples of linguistic choices made by sound engineers and voice actors are reported and explained, usually through the words of the staff themselves. For the sake of exposition, such choices are grouped according to their aim: avoiding varieties other than *dārīža*, discarding features that index negative qualities and increasing the realism of language. Subsequently, a comparison with the traditional standardisation process, as described by Haugen, shows how Plug-In's work of linguistic selection does not reach complete standardisation, especially as regards selection, codification and elaboration. While this is an expectable result, it is interesting to underline that this incompleteness is ultimately due to the purpose of dubbing, which is commercialising a show to a national audience; it is therefore suggested that the three cited aspects of standardisation are, in the case of dubbing in *dārīža*, subordinated to the fourth remaining aspect, i. e. acceptance.

Keywords: language standardization; Darija; Arabic media; linguistic variation; audiovisual translation

1. Introduction[1]

Dubbing audiovisual media in a language other than the original one always implies the abidance by language standards. When the target is an official national language, the standard model is clearly delineated by language authorities. Conversely, when the text is translated into an uncodified vernacular, the problem of norms emerges: how should variation be managed? How should key rules— such as pronunciation and grammar—be set and by whom? Which language model is to be followed? This paper will deal with this issue in reference to the dubbing of soap-operas in the Moroccan Arabic vernacular (henceforth referred to with the local name *dāriža*). More precisely, it will discuss to what extent the linguistic work underlying the writing of the Moroccan Arabic version of the dialogues resembles a traditional standardisation process. To do this, it will use a corpus of observations and acts of language editing which I collected at the most ancient dubbing studio in Morocco, i.e. Plug-In, located in Casablanca.

First of all, the issue will be contextualised in the double framework of the koineisation of spoken Moroccan Arabic and of previous sociolinguistic studies of dubbing in this vernacular; this will be done in section 2. After that, in section 3, the fieldwork and the data collection will be presented globally. In section 4, the criteria with which linguistic choices are undertaken in the dubbing studios will be grouped under different categories, and several examples will be provided for each of them. In section 0, a comparison will be made between the informal process of standardisation to which these choices give way and the traditional standardisation model described by Haugen (1966). Finally conclusions will be drawn on the reasons behind the peculiarity of the standardisation-through-dubbing work, and future developments will be envisaged for research on the subject.

2. Koineisation and media standardisation

In several Arabic-speaking countries, modernisation-related phenomena such as internal migration, urbanisation, improvement of transportations and mass schooling have led to the nation-wide or region-wide spread of the dialect of a main city, usually the capital (Miller 2007). This often ends up being considered as a sort of 'national dialect,' to the point that, even at the scholarly level, it is somewhat oxymoronically defined as 'standard:' e.g. 'Standard Gulf Arabic' (Ingham 1986: 282) or

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'Standard Egyptian Arabic' (Woidich 2007: 679). As a consequence, when dubbing is done in an Arabic vernacular, the main city's variety is customarily employed, such as Cairene for Egyptian (Gamal 2008: 9) or Damascene for Syrian Arabic (Berlinches Ramos 2022: 162). When it comes to Morocco, a different situation can be observed, as there is no general agreement on which variety may stand out as being 'pan-Moroccan.' This is not to say that convergence phenomena have not taken place: in fact, most recent works on Moroccan Arabic dialectology agree on the fact that a 'modern koiné' (Heath 2002: 10) is spreading across Morocco, replacing local dialects. This variety supposedly prevailing on the others has generally been described as a mix of features of different origins (pre-Hilali/Hilali, urban/rural etc.) which has taken shape in the urban areas of central Morocco (cf. Caubet 1993: VII; Lévy 1998: 23; Heath 2002: 8-10). As a socio-historical background to this phenomenon, authors usually mention increased mobility due to internal migration and improvement of transportations, as well as urbanisation and mass schooling (on the socio-demographic context of similar phenomena across Arabic-speaking countries, cf. also Miller 2007). However, the idea that a single koiné is actually spreading from the centre to other regions of Morocco presents some problems. First of all, its source cannot be clearly identified, as no uniform dialectal variety is spoken in the places that are generally seen as its origin (Casablanca, or the conurbation the latter forms with Rabat).[2] Secondly, since movements of population have marked most of the history of Arabic-speaking Morocco (as illustrated, for example, in Lévy 1998), several features may have spread inter-regionally since before the above-cited modernisation phenomena (i.e. before the 20th century). By comparing dialectological data from three Moroccan towns, Falchetta and Guerrero (2023) explicitly question the 'modern koiné' theory by showing that, while convergence is certainly taking place, it is not necessarily unidirectional or towards a single common variety.

Since language norms are so unstable, it is interesting to look into dubbing as a type of one-way communication in which media professionals address all members of a national community. In doing this, they will have to deal with linguistic variation without being able to rely on a single dialect which is universally recognised as the 'national standard dialect'—as is the case in Egypt and Syria. Few works have looked into language use in non-standard media Arabic in Morocco: three of them focus on dubbed soap-operas (Bensoukas and Blila 2013; Ziamari and Barontini 2013; Hickman 2023) one on

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[2] While old centres like Rabat used to be characterised by their own local urban varieties, the latter have receded over the last 100 years due to immigration fluxes from other, especially rural regions (Caubet 1998; Messaoudi 2001; 2002; El Himer 2015).

original Moroccan series (Benítez-Fernández and Guerrero 2022) and one on both (Falchetta 2022).[3] The focus of this article will be on the dubbing of soap-operas into *dārīža* because of the salience of the language-ideological activity that lies behind it. In the second half of the 2000s, Turkish soap-operas dubbed into the Syrian vernacular achieved resounding success at the pan-Arab level (Buccianti 2010); before that time, dubbing had been mainly in *fuṣḥā* (Maluf 2005), with some notable exceptions such as children's cartoons (Gamal 2008: 9). Very few years later, in 2009, the national Moroccan channel 2M launched *Las dos caras de Ana,* the first (Mexican) telenovela dubbed into the Moroccan vernacular. Success at the national level was comparable to that of Syrian-dubbed series at the pan-Arab scale, and more soap-operas were dubbed in the Moroccan *dārīža* resulting in excellent audience ratings. Nevertheless, several critiques also addressed the show(s), including as regards the type of language chosen, which was rejected for being too close to the Casablancan dialect or for resembling 'street language,' *lūġət z-zənqa* (Miller 2012).

As Bensoukas and Blila (2013), Ziamari and Barontini (2013) and Falchetta (2022) have shown, dubbing professionals attempt to create a more or less uniform *dārīža* by selecting among alternative forms in writing the dialogues. The features involved in this process of selection can be expressions, lexemes, morphemes or even phonemes. Sometimes it is a matter of language variety: e.g. a French or *fuṣḥā* form is chosen because no *dārīža* counterpart exists or, if it does, it carries negative indexations. This work is reminiscent of three of the four stages that, according to Haugen (1966), are typical in the traditional process of language standardisation: selection, codification and elaboration of the variety to be standardised.[4] However, the fact that state authorities are not the ones dictating the linguistic choices to be made in the dubbing (or at least not directly) has an impact on the smoothness of the standardisation process, as will be shown below.

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[3] The only other works that can be said to deal with this topic are Youssi's, particularly those concerning what he calls arabe marocain moderne ('Modern Moroccan Arabic'). He describes this as a mixed standard-vernacular variety commonly used in oral, erudite communicative contexts. Among these, he gives special prominence to "la présentation spontanée et/ou la diffusion de programmes de vulgarisation technique et scientifique," i.e. "The spontaneous hosting and/or technical and scientific popularisation in radio and TV programmes" (Youssi 1992: 25). The issue of sociolinguistic variation within arabe marocain moderne is not as stressed as in the other cited works; nevertheless, its use on Moroccan media is clearly underlined.

[4] The fourth stage envisaged by Haugen, first called 'acceptance' and then 'implementation' (Haugen 1983), is not encompassed by the dubbing work, as professionals do not actively ensure that the features they select are also employed in the community's actual language practices. However, as will be shown, predictions on the audience's acceptance still play a major role in the dubbing professionals' linguistic choices.

3. The data collection

During a six-month research stay in Morocco (January – July 2023), I carried out fieldwork in the Plug-In dubbing and post-production studios in Casablanca.[5] This is the same company that dubbed the first soap-operas in *dārīža* (including the above-mentioned *Las dos caras de Ana*) and is therefore to be considered a pioneer in this field.[6] Their only customer for *dārīža* voice-over is the national TV channel 2M (the same that launched the first dubbed telenovelas); apart from that, they also work with French dubbing. During the time I attended the studios, the *dārīža* branch was involved with the dubbing of three soap-operas, all Turkish.[7] Each soap-opera is managed as a single project, to which seven or eight staff members are devoted: three or four translators—who work remotely—and four sound engineers—who work in the studios. Among the latter, two also work as project manager and assistant project manager respectively. I had the opportunity to pay ten visits to the studios, during which I was allowed to sit with any of the twelve sound engineers, each of whom works in their own recording booth, and to take notes and interview them and the voice actors.

My written observations and questions focused on the linguistic editing of the scripts sent to the studios after being translated to *dārīža*, as well as on the general criteria followed by the staff in this endeavour. Since translators work remotely, I could not interview them during my visits; however, three of them were reached by telephone or e-mail.[8] The post-translation linguistic editing of the script of an episode happens in three rounds, i.e. first recording, mixing and modifications.

- the *first recording* consists in each voice actor dubbing the lines of their character separately with one of the engineers; in this process, both of them may suggest modifications to the translator's copy, with the engineer having the final word in the choice;

- the *mixing* consists in the integration and sound balancing of all the lines of each character appearing in a given episode, and is undertaken by either the project manager or her/his assistant. In completing these tasks, the mixer usually requests that the engineers re-record some of the lines by editing the wording;

[6] Other companies now exist that dub series in dārīža for other channels, e.g. the pan-Arab MBC5.

[7] For a discussion of the success of Turkish soap-operas in the Arabic-speaking world, cf. Buccianti (2010).

[8] The English translation of all the staff's comments and answers reported here is mine. All the exchanges in the studios were in *dārīža,* including those involving me, while all interviews with translators were carried out in French.

- the *modifications* are the implementation of the changes requested by the mixer in the previous phase. This happens, again, in the recording booth with an engineer requesting the voice actor to re-record the lines that need to be changed.

My fieldwork was aimed at understanding which criteria were followed in discarding certain linguistic features to the advantage of others. This was done by writing down every linguistic choice that was made during the sessions I joined, and by directly asking the engineer or the voice actor why it had been made. This allowed to identify different types of choices according to the linguistic-ideological criterion that guided them. In the following section, a tentative classification of these types of choices is given.

4. Criteria for linguistic selection

4.1. What makes a choice 'linguistic'

Before detailing the motivations behind the dubbing professionals' linguistic choices, which acts of selection and rejection are considered as having a 'linguistic' nature should be specified in the first place. By the term 'linguistic choice,' I mean that a specific form is being approved or discarded only because of its intrinsic linguistic qualities, e.g. its meaning (referential or indexical),[9] its transparency, etc. Conversely, changes aimed at adjusting the length of the translated lines to the duration of the lip movement were not considered as 'linguistic.'

In what follows, linguistic choices will be classified according to the epilinguistic comment[10] that supported them or, more rarely, to the interpretation I give on the basis of linguistic considerations (when I take these as being self-evident enough). The types of choices identified are the following:

- *variety-based,* i.e. when a given form was judged because of its belonging to French, *fuṣḥā*, *dārīža* or other Arabic varieties;[11]

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[9] By 'indexical meaning' I intend the non-referential value that a given semiotic (including linguistic) sign-in-use acquires as a consequence of its contextualization as well as of the ideological framework; cf. Silverstein (1976; 2003).

[10] By 'epilinguistic comments' I mean "tout discours autonome ayant pour objet 'les lectes ou l'activité de langage (de soi ou des autres)'" ["every case of self-supporting discourse about 'lects or (one's own or other people's) language as an activity"] (Canut 1998; in Bennis 2001: 637).

[11] For an account of the sociolinguistic status of, and ideologies associated with, local and foreign language varieties in Morocco, *cf.* Benítez-Fernández *et al.* (2013) and Pellegrini (2019).

- *quality-based,* i.e. when it was judged because of some quality (indexical meaning) explicitly attributed to it;[12]

- *realism-based,* i.e. when it was judged because of its plausibility in the context of the communicative exchange taking place in the scene.

4.2. Variety-based choices: avoiding French

A general concern of the studios, and one of the few explicit instructions given by 2M, is to avoid French forms as much as possible. I will exemplify such concern by reporting the occasion in which I first became aware of this general linguistic policy. The translator's copy of an episode of the soap-opera *Zalim Istanbul* contained the word لاتراس, i.e. the French loanword *la trace* 'the trace.'[13] As soon as the sound engineer SE1[14] read it, he interrupted the recording to take a screenshot and send it to the chief translator through a chat shared with other staff. In his message, he suggested replacing the loanword with *l-ʔātāṛ*, the corresponding Standard Arabic form phonologically adapted to *dārīža*.[15] After the recording session had finished, I asked him why he had done so, since *dārīža* speakers normally code-switch with French at will.[16] SE1's answer was that a) *dārīža* changes according to the region, which means not everyone uses or understands French, and that b) it is the management's explicit policy to reduce French as much as possible in the dialogues.

In fact, this one was the only discussion I witnessed in the studios which involved the choice of a French form. Nevertheless, comments provided by sound engineers and translators alike suggested

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[12] While indexical meaning definitely plays a role in all types of linguistic choice made in the context of dubbing, it was not always made explicit in the staff's epilinguistic comments.

[13] Translators' copies are always written in Arabic letters; consequently, translators' choices are reported here the way they were originally written (except when I failed to copy them on my notebook for time constraints). Since I did not report the original (English) copy from which the translation is done, the English corresponding forms that I write here in quotation marks are only to be intended as my own translation of the form employed by the staff member.

[14] Staff members are identified by a one- or two-letter code indicating their profession, plus a progressive number indicating the order in which they are first mentioned in this paper. SE stands for 'sound engineer,' T for 'translator,' VA for 'voice actor/actress.' Therefore, e.g., SE4 means 'the fourth sound engineer mentioned.' Only members responsible for any of the changes reported here are coded.

[15] At the end of my fieldwork, I was allowed to watch the final versions of some episodes, some of which had not been broadcast yet. I could thus verify that the engineer's suggestion, l-ʔātāṛ, was kept. In what follows, I will indicate every time I could check if the edit made it to the finalised episode; if this is not specified, then it means I did not have this opportunity.

[16] Moroccan Arabic-French code switching is a common practice and has been described in a great number of studies, e.g. Abbassi (1977), Bentahila and Davies (1983; 1995), Lahlou (1991), Ennaji (2005), Ziamari (2007; 2009; 2018), Post (2015), Falchetta (2024) to cite just a few.

that it was an important subject of discussion that framed the studios' general translating policy. The three translators interviewed (among whom was the chief translator, who coordinates all the translators' work) all confirmed this point, specifying that only two types of French lexemes are admitted in the scripts: those for which no counterpart exists in Arabic (e.g.: *arobase* 'at symbol') and those of very common use. Even so, they underlined that, in the latter case, a *dārīža* pronunciation should be maintained (e.g. [tilifun] rather than the French-sounding [telefɔn] for 'telephone'). One of the translators, T1, suggested that the use of French forms "depends on the country's political trend," According to her, while it was more frequent in the past to admit loanwords, these are now more restricted because of the dominant political ambition to give priority to English over French. Since no other staff member supported this explicit political reading, it remains unclear whether it should be seen as this translator's personal view or as a well-founded remark on the state's actual politico-linguistic agenda.

4.3. Variety-based choices: avoiding *fuṣḥā*

Fuṣḥā is a language entity enjoying prestige in the Moroccan and in other Arabic-speaking societies because of the religious, literary and cultural heritage to which it is indissolubly linked. Nevertheless, just as it is considered inadequate in certain domains of communication—usually those related to all things not erudite or formal—it can also, in other contexts, be considered inappropriate if mixed with *dārīža* speech. This explicitly emerged in at least four cases, three involving lexical variation and one involving syntax and morphology.

The first two were noted in the same recording session. One involved the translator's rendition of 'fault' with the word خطيئة, which SE2 asked the voice actress to change to *dənb* because the former sounded too '*Ar-risālah*-like' to him. The reference is to the 1976 movie (English title: 'The message') chronicling the prophet Muhammad's life and the revelation of Islam. Like all historical and religion-related movies, it is obviously in *fuṣḥā*—indeed, it is the utmost *fuṣḥā* movie, as SE2's comment seems to imply. The second targeted word was نار, the *fuṣḥā* word for 'fire,' which was changed to its colloquial counterpart *ʕāfiya*, again upon SE2's request.[17] Interestingly, both of SE2's changes have been reversed in subsequent stages of the editing work, as the translator's initial choices are actually heard in the aired version of the episode. In the third occasion, a voice actress, VA1, suggested changing the

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[17] No comment was given on this choice. The use of *ʕāfiya* (originally 'health') for 'fire' is a well-known case of euphemism that established itself in the colloquial Moroccan Arabic lexicon.

translator's سحبتهم for *ḫərrəžt-hum* "I withdrew [the money]." The engineer, SE3, subsequently explained to me that سحبتهم "is *fuṣḥā*" to motivate her change (however, they eventually agreed on recording the line twice with both options, unsure about which word the mixer would consider more appropriate).

In the fourth case, a discussion arose between voice actor VA2 and engineer SE4 on the sequence ما دام انت, composed of ما دام (literally the particle ما—*mā maṣdariyya ẓarfiyya* according to Standard Arabic grammar—plus the verb دام 'to last,' used in a fixed invariable form, which is an option available in *dārīža* but not in *fuṣḥā*), meaning 'while,' and of the 2nd person feminine singular isolated pronoun انت [18]; in English, ما دام انت would therefore be translated roughly as 'while you...' While reading this line, VA2 felt ما دام انت should be corrected to *ma damti*. SE4, in turn, corrected this further to *ma dumti*. The latter, incidentally, is the correct form that Standard Arabic would prescribe, with the verb *dāma* 'to last,' agreeing with the 2nd person feminine singular subject. Probably for this reason, VA2 criticised SE4's suggestion saying *verbatim*: "You're speaking *fuṣḥā*."[19] While SE4 and VA2 eventually agreed on keeping the translator's ما دام انت, a different engineer-voice actor couple did not correct the translator's ما دمتي (the *fuṣḥā*-like version of this construction) found in another script.

The editing cases described above explicitly attest to a concern for avoiding the use of *fuṣḥā* and preserving the '*dārīža*-ness' of the scripts. Another case that was not commented by the decision-maker and could be interpreted in this sense was noted when engineer SE5 asked to replace فـ [20] with *ʔīdān*: while both are resultative conjunctions recently borrowed from *fuṣḥā*, the latter is of much more common use. However, none of the changes aiming at the avoidance of a perceived *fuṣḥā* form reflected a unanimous agreement among the staff; I even observed some occurrences of the conjunction فـ (*fa*) in the finalised episodes, which means not everyone finds *ʔīdān* to be more *dārīža*. Therefore, the red line to be traced between *fuṣḥā* and *dārīža*—or, from another point of view, between admissable and non-admissable *fuṣḥā* forms—remains ambiguous most of the times.

Nevertheless, specific reasons may push to the choice of a *fuṣḥā* form instead of a non-*fuṣḥā* one even if the former is not of common use. In the case of SE1's replacement of the French لاتراس with the *fuṣḥā*-borrowed *l-ʔātāṛ*, the reason is that the alternative to the standard would be a word (perceived as) borrowed from French, and therefore undesired. Apart from the attempts to curb French forms,

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[18] The gender of the pronoun is inferred from the context, as the utterance is adressed to a woman in the scene at hand.

[19] Given this comment, it may be guessed that VA2's preference for *ma damti* was its greater closeness to the *dārīža* form *ma dəmti.* Also, since I did not use an audio recorder in my observations at the studios, I may have incorrectly noted *damti* instead of *dəmti;* the latter would make VA2's stance linguistically more coherent. In either case, what I am concerned with here is VA2's metalinguistic comment rather than the exact vowel he suggested using.

[20] The *fatḥa* was indicated on the script.

fuṣḥā may sometimes also function as a safe haven to express culturally sensitive words or concepts, according to the translators interviewed.[21] A well-known case, already mentioned by Ziamari and Barontini, is the use of the verb *rqəṣ* instead of *šṭəḥ* 'to dance:' the former results from the attribution of a *dārīža* morphology to the borrowed standard triliteral root *r-q-ṣ*, while the latter represents the most commonly used form for this semantic meaning. For *Ana*, the first soap-opera dubbed in Moroccan Arabic, the two authors report a clearly prevailing use of the form with the borrowed root, and posit that the other form may be judged as "potentiellement [choquant] ou pouvant heurter la sensibilité des téléspectateurs," i.e. "potentially shocking or at risk of offending the viewers" (Ziamari and Barontini 2013: 124).[22] Other examples are when بليد is used for 'stupid'[23] or دارت إجهاض for 'she had an abortion.'[24] Talking about the restrictions imposed by 2M, T1 explains that "sometimes there are simple words that have no taboo meaning, but a clean language close to *fuṣḥā* is what is aimed for." As for the chief translator, she maintained that "we try to obtain a standard way of speaking that is more oriented towards classical [i.e. standard] Arabic." However, these top-down indications are sometimes resisted. Talking about the *rqəṣ ~ šṭəḥ* 'controversy,' she recalled how she once clinged on having *šṭəḥ* accepted on her scripts, as she categorically refused an artificial form such as *rqəṣ* to appear on them. Indeed, observed language editing practices in the studios suggest that the staff has now become more akin to allow *šṭəḥ* to reach the viewers' ears.

4.4. Variety-based choices: avoiding other Arabic varieties

A common stereotype widespread across Arabic-speaking communities (including in the *Maġrib*) is that dialects spoken in the *Mašriq* are closer to *fuṣḥā* and, therefore, both more intelligible and more

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[21] Code-switching with Standard Arabic or French may have this function even in spontaneous, non-mediated communication; cf. Falchetta (2024: 55-56).

[22] The social sensitivity towards dancing is probably due to its association to the work of the *šīḫa* 'chanteuse-danseuse professionnelle qui récite des vers et chante à l'occasion des noces et des fêtes familiales à l'intérieur des maisons' ('professional female singer-dancer who recites verses and sings at weddings and family feasts in indoor spaces') or 'chanteuse de café-concert' ('live-entertainment bar female singer') (de Prémare 1995: 255). As bars are seen as promiscuous places in the Moroccan society, these artists do not enjoy good reputation and are often marginalised.

[23] A more common *dārīža* equivalent would be *mkəlləḫ.*

[24] This expression is composed of the vernacular verb دار 'to do,' and the standard إجهاض 'abortion.' In an internal glossary aimed at giving indications of 'proper language use' to the staff, this expression is indicated as preferable to طيحات الولد, literally 'she dropped the child.' The verb *ṭiyyəḥ* is reported in de Prémare (1996: 394) with the meaning faire avorter, lit. 'to cause to have an abortion.'

authentically 'Arab' than *Maġribi* varieties.[25] This has been referred to as 'the Maghreb-Mashreq ideology' (Hachimi 2013). While none of the comments collected in the studios supported or countered this stereotype, at least two acts of linguistic selection made clear how *Mašriqi* varieties are conceived as being fundamentally extraneous to Moroccan *dārīža* (a *Maġribi* vernacular). The first such act saw engineer SE6 ask a voice actress to reintegrate the etymological glottal stop (*hamz*) into a verb which the translator had written as كيطمن ('he makes / is making sure'), so as to pronounce it *kā-yṭmaʔann*. He gave a number of reasons for this choice: a) the *hamz*-less variant is regional, b) it is less common, c) it is how it is pronounced in the *Mašriq* and, in any case, d) one had better avoid dubious decisions (*šubha*). Engineer SE7 allegedly had a similar preoccupation concerning نقضي 'take revenge,' in the utterance غادي نقضي عليكم كاملين 'I'll take revenge on all of you,' which she asked the voice actress to change to the semantically equivalent *ġādi nəntāqəm ʕlī-kum kāmlīn* (with *nəntāqəm* being the replacing word). She then asserted that "*naqḍi* [the verb the translator had chosen] is used in *fuṣḥā* and in the *Mašriq*, whereas *nəntāqəm* is *dārīža*".

Besides extra-Moroccan dialects, the linguistic trimming visibly leads professionals to also discard features associated with marked Moroccan varieties. More precisely, I took note of two epilinguistic comments indicating the staff's concern with avoiding rural (*ʕṛūbi*[26]) forms. The source of the first one was the executive head of the company. The Plug-In management rarely intervene in the language editing work, which is normally done in the recording booths (to use SE7's words, "the company management *kā-təbqa bʕīda ʕlī-na*, i. e. "lies far from us"). If they do intervene, it means that the acceptability of the whole product is at stake. In one occasion—the executive reported to me—upon hearing a character say *sūrət l-bāb* ("lock the door"), she immediately asked the staff to re-dub the line getting rid of the verb *sūrət* 'to lock,' which she associated with rural speech. She therefore had the line changed to *sədd l-bāb* ('close the door'), as she found associating a Turkish actress with a *ʕṛūbi* voice preposterous.

The second comment came, indirectly, during the same recording session in which SE4 and VA2 debated the *ma damti / ma dumti* issue—quite an animated session indeed. The object of discussion was the /q/ ~ /g/ variation—a phenomenon of phonologic alternation involving Arabic lexemes that present an etymological /q/, e.g. *qəddām ~ gəddām* 'in front of.' In Moroccan urban areas, including Casablanca (where most staff members come from and live), use of /g/ where /q/ would or could be

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[25] Mašriq and Maġrib are essentially two geographical denominations referring, respectively, to the eastern and western parts of the Arabic-speaking world. They are often used to refer to culturally and linguistically defined regions as well.

[26] The equivalent of 'bumpkin.'

expected often indexes the rural origin of the speaker (Caubet 1993: 12; Hachimi 2005; 2007; 2011; 2012). This partly matches the actual distribution of /g/, which is more frequent in the rural areas of the north-east, centre and south of the country (Heath 2002: 141–147). In a previous study of soap-operas dubbed in *dārīža* (also by the Plug-In studios), I observed what appears to be the general policy regarding lexemes that vary between these two phonemes in common use: all the words concerned are invariably read with /q/, except for *gāl* 'to say' which is the only one never pronounced as *qāl* (Falchetta 2022: 221).[27] Contrary to this policy, VA2 (perhaps accidentally) read *tqūl* while acting; SE4 promptly replied *tgūl*, implying she was asking him to re-record the line replacing *q* with *g*. Before complying, VA2 jokingly said to her: "What? You speak like a ʕṛūbīya [i.e. a bumpkin girl]?" SE4 wittingly played along the joke by saying *verbatim: l-ʕṛūbīya hūwa tta!*, i.e. 'You are the bumpkin girl!' The core of SE4's joke is lost in translation, as she pronounced *tta* 'you' with nasal assimilation (the usual pronunciation in dubbings is *nta*), which is precisely a feature generally ascribed to ʕṛūbi people (cf. Hachimi 2005: 45; 2018: 19). This exchange of wits therefore reconfirmed the inconvenience of speaking ʕṛūbi in dubbings; however, the inter-lexical distribution of the two phonemes was also reconfirmed since, joking aside, SE4 eventually had VA2 re-record the same line with *tgūl*. May this indirectly suggest that ʕṛūbi is not the only (stereotyped) speech that is stigmatised? Again, Hachimi (2005; 2007; 2011; 2012) shows how some Casablancan women of Fessi origin, while predominantly avoiding /g/ whenever they can, prefer *gāl* because they think Fessis saying *qāl* sounds funny and overblown.

So what variety of *dārīža* is 'suitable' for the dialogues of soap-operas? None of the professionals ever mentioned spontaneously a model of *dārīža* while attending to their language editing work. However, when questioned, sound engineers (all from Casablanca) described such variety as '[geographically] centralised *dārīža*,' 'monitored *dārīža*,' '*dārīža sui generis*' and 'Casablanca *dārīža* but modified for everyone to understand it.' The interviews with the translators (also from Casablanca) provided even more detail to these characterisations. Below I report two statements, respectively by the two translators T1 and T2, who gave them in answering the question: "Do you translate the way you speak or do you follow a different model?"

> We try to keep as close as possible to our spoken *dārīža,* but are given many limitations [...] We have to restrict ourselves to the *dārīža* spoken in Casablanca and Rabat: this is the standard, the *dārīža* spoken in this region. (T1)

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[27] Several works on dialect contact in Moroccan urban centres (Hachimi 2007; 2011 and others; Falchetta and Guerrero 2023) show a similar trend in speakers' actual language use, with gāl prevailing over qāl and /q/ over /g/ in all other lexemes.

> When translating a script, I choose a standard and everyday *dārīža,* avoiding all words and terms specific to a region. (T2)

As can be seen, both agree on regionally marked features having to be avoided. Indeed, the regional marking of an aspiring translator's speech may be a hindrance to their recruitment, according to the chief translator (who is also in charge with the job interviews):

> We start conversing in *dārīža* with them to see if they use strange words. When we find someone who has a regional colloquial Arabic, such as from Fes [it's problematic]. It's not a matter of accent, that does not affect the script. It's a matter of words, because they can never be totally filtered and the translator does not accept to change them. They need to have a standard regional Arabic. The aim of these shows is to standardise Moroccan Arabic, it's an avowed goal.

4.5. Quality-based choices

Several features are discarded not because they are seen as belonging to some variety other than ('standard') *dārīža*, but because they are considered as inappropriate to be used on the screen. These are not limited to more or less taboo words, such as insults or terms referring to sex, sexuality, death etc., but also include forms that are branded as harsh (*qāsəḥ*) or indexing other negative qualities. Two revealing examples are words referring to parents and the prefixes *kā-* and *tā-.*

In Morocco, it is commonly understood that calling one's father and mother respectively *ḅāḅa* and *ṃāṃa* "dévoile l'appartenance à une classe aisée" (Ziamari and Barontini 2015: 583), i.e. discloses the speaker's belonging to the upper class. Conversely, forms such as *ḅḅa* and *ṃṃ-i,* or *l-wālīd* and *l-wālīda,* are known to bear a working-class connotation. Similar associations appear to be reproduced at Plug-In: a project manager once sent a line back to the recording studios because *ḅḅā-k* 'your father' (consisting of *ḅḅa* plus the 2nd person singular suffix pronoun *–k*) had been used, requesting it be corrected to *ḅāḅā-k.* SE3 was charged with re-recording the line, so I asked him what he thought was the reason for that request.[28] He answered that *ḅāḅā-k* is nice (*zwīn*) and may be used with a stranger (i.e. is formal), unlike *ḅḅā-k* which is *qāsəḥ* and "a mum says it to her child when she is angry." A reported anecdote further proved that, if a feature of speech is enregistered (Agha 2005) as associated with an undesired stance or social type, it can indeed be hard to have it authorised by the management: the

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[28] I rarely attended the mixing sessions, as few linguistic changes are decided during this process compared to the first recording phase. The downside of this choice was that I had to ask the sound engineer rather than the project manager why the latter had decided that a given form should be discarded. While this prevented me from hearing the main decision-maker's opinion, I still considered the engineer's answer valid as it reflected the company's general policies on language appropriateness.

chief translator recalled her struggle, while translating the scripts of an old soap-opera, to be allowed to make a scoundrel speak in a way reflecting his social characterisation, including calling his mum by *l-wālīda*. She eventually succeeded.

The morphemes *kā-* and *tā-* are prefixed to an imperfective (p-stem) verb form to signify a progressive, habitual or gnomic aspect. From the diachronic and diatopic perspectives, *kā-* is predominant in non-*Hilāli* varieties and in northern cities (Aguadé 1996: 198–199), while *tā-* is more frequent in *Hilāli* varieties and in southern areas (Aguadé 1996: 200–201).[29] However, in areas of strong internal immigration such as Rabat and Casablanca, both seem to be used interchangeably and no previous dialectological study has found any linguistic or non-linguistic factor causing the use of either variant. Nevertheless, when SE2 found himself working with a script full of prefixes *tā-* during one of his sessions, he regularly corrected all of them to *kā-* (when the voice actor did not do it himself). Overwhelmed by the abundance of *tā-*'s, he ended up commenting *verbatim: hād ḫū-na mūl s-skrīpt kā-ydīr t-'tā' bəzzāf!* (i.e. "This script guy goes with '*tā*' a lot!"). I asked two sound engineers *and* the translators T1 and T2 how they thought these two forms differed, as it was completely opaque to me. Without ambiguity, engineer SE8 asserted that *tā-* is *qāsəḥ* and *ʕṛūbi*. A lengthier explanation—which nevertheless did not contradict SE8's point—was provided by SE7, who was also assistant project manager:

> In *dāriža* we use both *kā-* and *tā-*, but *tā-* is when one speaks with their friends, it is common language (*lūġət l-ʕāmma*); *kā-* means politeness (*ṣwāb*), it suits dubbing, is more elegant. (...) However, I may leave some *tā-*'s when mixing, so as to vary a bit. It also depends on the verb.

As for the translators, both of them declared to prefer using *kā-* in their scripts due to it being the prefix they use in their everyday speech; however, they also stated that both forms are correct. Neither of them attributed any specific quality to either form which could affect its suitability to be heard on the screen.

One last, interesting case deserves to be mentioned. A project manager asked SE7 to have the voice actress change *ši luqma* (lit. 'a morsel') to *ši ḥāža* (lit. 'something') to signify 'something to eat.' The

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[29] Non-Hilāli include pre-Hilāli and Andalousi varieties. The former were brought by the early Arab Muslim conquerors in the so-called 1st wave of Arabisation (7th-8th centuries); the latter are linked to the continuous migrations of Arabic speakers from the Iberian peninsula (i.e. from Al-Andalous) in various moments between the 8th and the 15th century (Vicente 2000: n. 3). The Hilāli varieties are those brought in the 2nd wave of Arabisation, which consisted in the migration of several Arab tribes (including the Banū Hilāl) to the Maghreb in the 11th century (cf. Marçais 1960). The idea that the validity of this diachronic distinction is still valid for today's taxonomy of dialect varieties has been put into question e.g. by Benkato (2019).

discarded *luqma* specifically indicates a small quantity of a semolina- or barley-based meal made into a ball to be eaten. SE7 justified the mixer's decision by explaining that *luqma* 'is too *dārīža.*' Therefore, despite the fact that certain choices (particularly variety-based ones) seem to indicate the staff's preoccupation for the dubbing to be in 'pure' *dārīža,* this comment reveals that an excessive amount of '*dārīža*-ness' may also cause a feature to be discarded.

4.6. Realism-based choices

I will end this section by mentioning those cases in which linguistic choices were declaredly or implicitly aimed at increasing the naturalness or likeability of an utterance. I have already mentioned the chief translator telling about her past struggle to have a scoundrel talk like a working-class person by saying, among other things, *l-wālīda.* In the studios, I could witness at least three more cases in which realism was at issue. In the first of these, voice actress VA4 spontaneously decided, while acting, to replace the conjunction العوض لي with *f ḅḷāṣt ma* (both meaning 'instead of'). Apparently, her choice was due to her perceiving the latter form as more colloquial, since her own comment was that "*Saʕdīya* [the character she was dubbing] is a servant, a simple person."[30] The second case involved engineer SE5 asking to change the sentence مستعدة نهضر معاك "I'm ready to talk to you" to *wāš təbġi nhaḍru āna w-əyyāk* "Do you want to talk to me?" (lit.: "Do you want you and me to talk?"); according to her, the new sentence was more 'realistic' in that "it gives the idea of a reciprocal relationship." A final, clear example of this kind of change was given by voice actor VA5, who autonomously changed the translator's فالحقيقة to *ṣ-ṣārāḥa* (both meaning 'actually / in fact,' but the second being of much more common usage).

5. Discussion

The mere fact that, being a vernacular, *dārīža* is an uncodified variety by definition engenders the absence of a unified norm at multiple levels: phonetic realisation of phonemes, phonologic assignment of lexemes, morpho-syntactic constructions, appropriate vocabulary, loanwords etc. The examples of linguistic choices reported in the previous section show how the professional staff at Plug-In studios attempt to manage such normative instability in order to create *dārīža* dialogues for originally foreign

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[30] It may be observed that العوض لي, however vocalised in *dārīža,* recalls the *fuṣḥā* equivalent *ʕiwaḍan ʕan.* As for *f ḅḷāṣt ma,* it contains the old Spanish loanword *ḅḷāṣa,* which is by now of very common use in Moroccan Arabic. Therefore, while the former choice is also employed in *dārīža,* it would bring the utterance closer to Standard Arabic.

soap-operas. To what extent can all this linguistic work be compared to a traditional process of language standardisation? It may be remembered that, after explaining how the *dārīža* of aspiring translators is tested in interviews, the chief translator concluded with this straightforward statement: "The aim of these shows is to standardise Moroccan Arabic, it's an avowed goal." By looking at Haugen's definition of selection, codification and elaboration, we will now discuss how much of this is attained.

What I call variety-based choices most directly correspond to his "*selection* of some kind of a model from which the norm can be derived" (Haugen 1966: 932, author's emphasis): each variety (French, *fuṣḥā*, *mašriqi* and marked Moroccan Arabic dialects) that is branded as extraneous to the 'desired' language is a language model that is discarded. This means it is mostly a negative kind of selection: rather than picking a dialect and electing it as the chosen norm, the staff single out undesired language models and discard the features associated with them.[31] The fact that some of them, when asked, identify (positively) the resulting *dārīža* with 'modified Casablanca' or 'central Moroccan' speech was not reflected in the comments supporting the linguistic choices made in the studios: in other words, nobody declared to prefer a form to another by virtue of it being 'more' or 'truly Casablancan' or similar. Quality-based choices could also more or less implicitly contribute to this type of negative selection. In at least two of the three cases presented (parents-referring words and verbal prefixes), the staff's concern for language appropriateness may be legitimately suspected of hiding an actual concern for discarding regionally or socially marked speech—which would mean these, too, could be considered variety-based choices. This been said, even when this negative selection aims at excluding varieties that are unanimously perceived as extraneous to *dārīža*, i.e. French and *fuṣḥā*, it is not always easy to draw a clear separating line: the debate on the acceptability of every single French borrowing and the lack of agreement on the admissibility of forms that (a part of the staff believe they) belong to *fuṣḥā* are both evidence of these blurred language borders.

Both variety- and quality-based choices also serve the purpose of *codification*, i.e. reaching "*minimal variation in form*" (Haugen 1966: 931, author's emphasis). When basic language levels such as phonology and morphology are involved, variation is easily reduced as the number of variants is often limited to two: the 2nd person pronouns are always pronounced *nta / nti / ntūma* and the assimilated *tta / tti / ttūma* are never heard; /q/ and /g/ are split between two well-defined groups of lexical items; *tā-* is replaced with *kā-* etc. When the choice is between lexemes, the most semantically broad one

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[31] This from the staff's perspective. Conversely, a scientific analysis encompassing different texts and genres does allow the identification of a specific register, and even of a social type associated with it, which dubbing privileges through linguistic selection (Falchetta 2022).

seems to win (*ḥāža* 'thing' instead of *luqma* 'morsel,' *sədd* 'to close' instead of *sūrət* 'to lock') so that it could be argued that the lexical repertoire tends to be impoverished; however, a wider study of lexical choices made in the dubbing work is needed to appreciate the truth of this statement. Nevertheless, not only is variation never completely eliminated (as also happens in traditional standardisation) but codification is always in the process of being negotiated. This was shown above in reference to the blurred inter-variety borders. To this can be added the chief translator's struggle to use *šṭəḥ* insted of *rqəṣ* for 'to dance,' the lack of constance in replacing the conjunction *fa* with the grammatically equivalent *ʔīdān* and the unstable phonetic realisation of several words (e.g. *zūž ~ žūž* 'two') which was occasionally observed in several recording sessions.

The third process, *elaboration*, is defined by Haugen as aiming at *"maximal variation in function"* (Haugen 1966: 931, author's emphasis). In the limited context of dubbing, 'variation in function' can almost exclusively mean adjusting language to the type of character or staged situation. Therefore, if one has to judge from the resulting texts, professionals appear to be less concerned with elaboration than with selection and codification, as also emerged in the analysis I previously carried out on language use in the soap-operas (Falchetta 2022). It actually seems that, when someone attempts typifying a character linguistically, they are met with significant opposition from project managers— as occurred to the chief translator when she tried to have a scoundrel say *l-wālīda*. Nevertheless, what I call 'realism-based choices' are evidence that the staff are, indeed, concerned with the functional diversification of the language of dubbing: see, e.g., VA4's spontaneous adjustment to a more ordinary register to dub a servant. In general, all the choices of this type are indicative of a search for naturalness and, as such, arguably prove that the staff—or at least a part of them—do wish to reproduce the situational and social diversification of real-life *dārīža*—and actually try to move in that direction. SE7 confirmed this when, as a comment to VA4's register adjustment, she declared that the linguistic typification of characters is actually part of the dubbing work: "We dress characters with words, they are like their signature." Thus, if such typification eventually has a limited impact on language diversification—as emerges from linguistic analyses—it is because of the same preoccupation that blocks project managers and executives from admitting words such as *l-wālīda, šṭəḥ* or insults: offending the most sensitive viewers of the soap-operas through the use of an excessively familiar parlance.

6. Conclusion

The picture that emerges from the analysis is one of incomplete language standardisation, a conclusion similar to that reached by Bensoukas and Blila (2013) in the analysis of another series dubbed in Moroccan Arabic. On the basis of the data collected through detailed observations and interviews *in*

the dubbing studios, we can now explain why this process does not reach completion. First of all, no officially recognised institution supports it. Secondly, the linguistic work underlying the dubbing of soap-operas is an instance of language standardisation for commercial purposes, which dictates certain constraints: not offending the audience's morals, being understandable to all Moroccans and, at the same time, creating an aesthetically nice product. Such constraints directly impact on each of the three aspects of standardisation analysed in the previous section, since they prevent:

- the selection of a best vernacular, which would not be accepted by speakers of other varieties
- the settlement of fluctuating choices, as achieving total linguistic homogeneity is ultimately not the studio's top priority, and
- stylistic diversification, as some socially characterised registers may offend the public

In sum, linguistic concerns are totally subordinated to the audience's acceptation of the whole soap-opera product—including their language. In this sense, one could say that the fourth goal of traditional standardisation, which in the first version of Haugen's theory was called *acceptance*, gets the better of the other three in the context of dubbing. In traditional standardisation, where state institutions support the linguistic work (which is usually done by academics), the state not only seeks the national community's acceptance from a more powerful position than dubbing studios, but also simultaneously imposes the standard in public domains, such as school and administration.

Several questions are raised by the Plug-In studio's management of language variation, but answering them would excessively extend the length of this paper and are thus left for subsequent publications: is there a social or regional dialect which resembles the *dārīža* of soap-operas? Through which semiotic processes do the selected and discarded forms end up indexing the qualities that dubbing professionals attribute to them? And what can be said on the reception of these dubbings by the public? In order to provide a fuller picture of processes of informal standardisation in Moroccan Arabic, further research should also be dedicated to the language policies of other dubbing studios, as well as to how variation is managed in other types of media product. This would help understand how the language ideologies at work in the Plug-In studio are actually relevant at the national level, and how criteria vary according to genre, audience and medium.

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Jacopo Falchetta is a postdoctoral researcher in Arabic Sociolinguistics and Dialectology at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Bergamo. He is currently carrying out research on linguistic variation, indexicalities and media use of colloquial Moroccan Arabic. He is also a temporary lecturer in Moroccan Arabic at INALCO, Paris, and has previously worked as an Arabic lecturer at the University of Bayreuth and at the University of Bergamo. His publications deal with issues in linguistic (phonetic, phonologic and morphologic) variation in diatopy and diastratia, language contact, standardisation and media language use with reference to Moroccan Arabic. He collaborates with the French research units IREMAM (Aix-Marseille University) and LACNAD (INALCO), and with the French-based research network (ANR) 'Afro-Asiatic Languages and Linguistics – Bridging the Red Sea Drift,' led by the research unit LLING (University of Nantes).

Jacopo can be contacted at jacopo.falchetta@unibg.it