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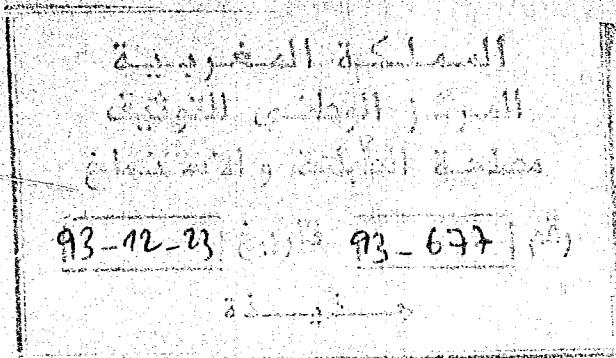
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**MOROCCAN CONTENT, ENGLISH MEDIUM:
A LOOK AT SOME MOROCCAN
ENGLISH CORRESPONDENCE**

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***Abstract:** While English, unlike French, remains very much a foreign rather than a second language in Morocco, there are certain limited circles within which Moroccans use English as a medium for genuine, every-day communication, university English Departments being the obvious example. This paper is based on a corpus of letters written in English by Moroccans and concerning university matters. It identifies a number of recurring communicative strategies which reflect Moroccan culture and values but which could be perceived as inappropriate or completely misleading by native speakers of English. It raises the question of whether these characteristics of written Moroccan English should be accepted or discouraged.*

For most Moroccan students of English, there are probably few situations where they are called upon to use English as a medium for authentic communication, rather than classroom-related discourse. Obviously, this will happen if they need to interact with English speakers who do not know the other languages used in Morocco, for instance when meeting foreign visitors or applying to a university abroad, but these are not everyday occurrences. On the other hand, we do find the use of English as a medium of communication between Moroccans themselves; for instance, at any rate until recently, there has been quite a strong tradition in some of our departments for students to address teachers in English even outside the classroom and on matters not directly related to course content. It is some examples of this type of communication which I would like to look at today.

I shall restrict my attention to written communication only. My corpus consists of a collection of letters that have been addressed to me, over a period of several years, by English department students, both undergraduate and postgraduate. Each letter is thus a bona fide communication in English from one Moroccan to another Moroccan. The content of the letters can largely be classified under four headings; requests (for

advice, information, letters of recommendation or help in obtaining grants), thanks (for similar types of service), apologies (mainly for late submission of work or absence from lectures) and information (including reports on work in progress, explanation of problems, general news, etc.).

I started collecting these letters in the first place because so many of them made me laugh, or at least smile. There are some cases where the laughter was inspired by the riter's problems with grammar or choice of vocabulary. For instance, I have a note which reads

(1) I will not be able to give my expose because I have broken down.

and a more formal letter which opens:

(2) It is a great pleasure to write to you today wishing you would kindly accept this delay in resubmission of my monograph due to sanitary reasons.

However, these are relatively rare, since the writers of most of the letters have a very good command of English grammar and vocabulary; and they are not my present concern.

What I would like to consider here are the many cases where, although the message is expressed in correct and even sophisticated English, parts of it nevertheless seem quite un-English. All the examples I will cite have been read by native speakers of English, whose reactions to them ranged from hilarious laughter to considerable annoyance. As a member of the Moroccan community, I am able to recognize in these letters strategies of communication, selection and organization which are certainly part of Moroccan culture; many of the remarks which sound incongruous in English might pass as quite normal in Arabic discourse, and some indeed might seem unexceptional if phrased in French. It is the incorporation of such strategies into what seems to be a piece of English discourse which is so often disconcerting.

Since time is very short, I will just pick out a few of the more common strategies in my collection.

Perhaps the most striking overall characteristic in these letters, written by students who are obviously trying their best to be polite and respectful, is the use of exaggeration. This appears in many forms. There are, for instance, many examples of excessive flattery of the addressee, which would certainly be perceived as fawning and irritating by an English-speaking recipient:

(3) It is a great honor for me to express my gratefulness for the generous care you have been bestowing on me.

(4) It ennobles me to write these few lines to thank you...

(5) I feel deeply touched by the nobility of your character and the greatness of your soul.

Gratitude is formulated in equally dramatic ways:

(6) Words are not capable of expressing my enormous and sincere thankfulness to you.

(7) I could never be tired of expressing my gratefulness to you...

(8) I am in an extreme happiness for your remark upon my plan.

Regret, in the letters conveying apologies, is likewise stated very forcefully:

(9) I am deeply sorry for not having enclosed this section of my work.

(10) I am utterly sorry for this delay.

(11) I am terribly sorry for not delivering my report on time.

We find "awfully sorry," "extremely sorry," "really sorry." but never a mere "sorry"! The reasons offered for these misdemeanors are also fairly dramatic:

(12) I was awfully sick...

(13) I am very ill...

(14) I have a strong pain in my stomach...

and so on

Another general strategy, which is certainly not specific to Moroccans, but which seems to be carried out rather blatantly in many of these letters, is to attempt to present the best possible image of oneself. For instance, in the letters from students asking to be considered for third cycle grants, we find frequent statements of strong self-praise, which might not go down too well with members of English-speaking cultures, who value modesty, and might in any case feel that the teacher, rather than the student, is the one in a position to evaluate the latter's suitability. We find, for instance:

(15) I am quite sure of my abilities, and that I could do very well.

(16) I will let you know, sir, that I have never seen failure during my sixteen years of studies despite the intricate circumstances I was and I am still hurled in.

They also tend to state their ambitions for the future in very strong terms, as in the case of the student who writes of

(17) ...my request to be given a grant to open new horizons in the domain of research...

and others who write

(18) I have a fervent desire to continue my studies...

(19) I am still yearning for further knowledge.

Where the student's results are not as good as they might have been, this is presented as being due to bad luck or external elements rather than any weakness in the writer. For instance, one student writes:

(20) I have succeeded in my four years' studies, always passing in the first session, though I have not been lucky to get a distinction each year.

Another observes:

(21) The marks I had on the exam...could have been much better if some external elements have not interfered...

This tendency to disclaim any responsibility for failure is also evident in the letters presenting apologies, which are full of denials that the writer is to blame, such as the following:

(22) The late submission of my work is not due to any negligence on my part, but it is due to unfavorable and unexpected circumstances.

(23) The late submission of my work...was not out of carelessness, it was against my own will...

The most frequent expressions in such letters seem to be "against my will," "beyond my will" and "out of my will," as again and again the writers present themselves as passive victims of fate.

Finally, one other recurrent strategy which strikes me as rather inappropriate is that which presents the making of a request or an apology as something which gives pleasure. Even a person who has evidently applied unsuccessfully to a grant in the past can write:

(24) I am happy to apply for you once again about a grant in translation or comparative literature...

and similarly, we read

(25) I am very pleased to ask for your help and guidance...

(26) I find it a good opportunity to write this letter and ask you for a service...

I imagine that this strategy is probably traceable to the transfer of introductory formulas (*j'ai le plaisir*, etc.) into English.

To conclude, my aim is not really to criticize the writers of these letters, or to suggest that their communications were unsuccessful. They were after all addressed to a fellow-Moroccan who was in a good position to understand the real intentions of the writers. However, I feel sure that if these students wrote similar letters to non-Moroccan individuals or institutions, they would often make a very bad impression, with sincerely-meant remarks being judged ludicrous or irritating. Such

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correspondence might thus contribute to the formation of rather negative stereotypes of Moroccans as being prone to needless exaggeration, flattery and self-praise. I would like to end simply by raising the question of how we should regard this type of material. Should we accept it as a perfectly valid manifestation of what we could call Moroccan English discourse, or should we rather encourage students to avoid it (which could be done either by writing in Arabic in the first place, or by writing in English but avoiding these strategies)? Whatever position is taken, I think we need to make students more aware that there is far more to successful communication than merely expressing any kind of content in any grammatically and lexically correct form.

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