

ARABIC VARIETIES: FAR AND WIDE

Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of AIDA Bucharest, 2015



editors
GEORGE GRIGORE
GABRIEL BIȚUNĂ

Arabic Varieties: Far and Wide
*Proceedings of the 11th International
Conference of AIDA – Bucharest, 2015*

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YES/NO INTERROGATIVES IN MOROCCAN DUTCH

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Abstract: In the variety of Dutch spoken by young Moroccans growing up in the Netherlands and Flanders, yes/no interrogatives are found that combine Dutch content with Moroccan Arabic and Tarifiyt Berber interrogative marking. One regularly finds constructions where Arabic and Berber elements are combined. Moreover, the use of the Moroccan Arabic pre-clausal marker *waš* has been extended beyond its original usage.

Keywords: Moroccan Arabic, yes/no interrogatives, crossing, immigrant varieties of Dutch, Tarifiyt Berber, Moroccan flavored Dutch.

1. Moroccan Flavored Dutch

In the 1960s¹ a large number of Moroccan workers came to the Netherlands and Belgium. Most of them had their background in northern Morocco, and, as a result, a large percentage had Tarifiyt Berber as their native language. Moroccan Arabic also played an important role, both as a native language and – for many – as a second language in addition to Tarifiyt.

From early on, the generation that spent at least part of their childhood in the Netherlands used Dutch as a vehicle for communication with their peers, both of Moroccan and of non-Moroccan background. In a study carried out as early as the late 1980s, Jan-Jaap de Ruiter found that, among youngsters aged 11/12 and 13/14, already over 60% of the interviewees reported using Dutch with their siblings (De Ruiter 1989:58; 220). Thus, Dutch has been a major factor in Moroccan Dutch in-group communion for at least thirty years.

In 2008, Jacomine Nortier and Margreet Dorleijn wrote a seminal article in which they showed that a speech style had evolved in the Moroccan Dutch community, which they baptized Moroccan Flavored Dutch (MFD). They put the origin of this style (or *ethnolect*) in the early 2000s. MFD is characterized by a long list of features (Nortier & Dorleijn 2008: 130), which includes phonetics, morphosyntax, and lexicon. According to the authors, MFD is not restricted to the Moroccan community, but has crossed (Rampton 1995) into other indigenous and non-indigenous communities in the Netherlands.

In this article, I present one MFD feature that was already singled out by Nortier & Dorleijn (2008), the use of Moroccan-type yes/no interrogatives. These interrogative structures show a blend of Moroccan Arabic, Tarifiyt Berber and Dutch, which makes them particularly interesting.

The article is based on the almost unlimited corpus of publicly accessible Internet communication (cf. El Aissati 2008; Lafkioui 2008; Dorleijn 2016).² For the study of MFD, Moroccan Internet fora in Dutch targeting this group constitute a large and diversified corpus that gives an idea of in-group communication. To this one may add other Internet genres, such as Twitter

¹ My sincere thanks go to Khalid Mourigh, Jacomine Nortier and Margreet Dorleijn for their help, their enlightening discussions, and their comments on earlier drafts of this article. Many thanks to Margreet Dorleijn for explaining the meaning of the Turkish tweet in (30) and to Tijmen Pronk for establishing the linguistic background of the tweeter in (35) on the basis of other tweets by the same person. Of course all responsibility for errors and flaws in the argument lie exclusively with the author.

² All Internet data used here are publicly available, or can be accessed by means of an automatically approved registration, obviously meant to protect the site from robots.

(<https://twitter.com>) and Ask (<http://ask.fm>), which, however, are not strictly targeting the Moroccan Dutch community.

2. Yes/no interrogatives in Moroccan Arabic, Tarifiyt Berber and Dutch

The three most relevant languages to the Moroccan Dutch community are Moroccan Arabic, Tarifiyt Berber and Dutch. Southern Moroccan Berber varieties (Tashelhiyt and the southwestern varieties of Central Moroccan Berber) are important as heritage languages of the Moroccan Dutch community, but do not seem to have any impact on MFD.

The languages under consideration have one characteristic of yes/no questions in common, special intonation. As the basis of this investigation is a written corpus, where prosody is only minimally marked (mainly by writing letters multiply), this aspect remains out of consideration here.

Otherwise, the three languages are quite different in their forms and structures. The main syntactic feature that distinguishes yes/no questions in Dutch is word order: In yes/no questions the verb normally takes the first position in the sentence, while it is in second position in non-subordinate assertions, e.g.

- (1) en vertelde me meen je dat, ik zei ja echt ik meen dat.
 ‘and told me: Do you mean that (are you serious?), I said: yes, I really mean that (yes, I am really serious)’
 ([http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=2974602&s=a97d792bc9ef3058142b2042ebd58f67](http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=2974602&s=a97d792bc9ef3058142b2042ebd58f67;);
 @basbousa, 17/12/2009)

In this fragment, the question *meen je dat* has verb-initial structure, while the assertion *ik meen dat* has the verb in second position.

Moroccan Arabic has a dedicated marker of interrogative sentences, clause-initial *waš*. Its use is not obligatory—prosody only can do the job—, but frequent (Maas 2011:228-230; Caubet 1993:II, 73-76). Example:

- (2) Wash mazal ma n3astoe /*waš mazal ma nʃastu?*/
 ‘(waš) aren’t you yet asleep?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1531000&s=6e425db1b117db8d22ea3ff73680a075>;
 @berkanijatjuh, 11/8/2007, 23:10)

- (3) Wesh hedi gedmaaaaa /*waš hadi xɔdma?*/
 ‘(waš) is this work?’³
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1898931&s=07bdc0996219158c6033effe9ca0ca88>;
 @Goodwife, 7/4/2008)

In Tarifiyt Berber, there is also a clause-initial marker of yes/no interrogatives, which is *ma* almost everywhere.⁴ Different from Moroccan Arabic *waš*, this *ma* is relatively rare, and may be pragmatically more specific than its Arabic counterpart (Khalid Mourigh p.c.). Example:

- (4) meh thedagreth nigh? /*ma tɛdɔdɔyɛd niy?*/
 ‘(ma) are you blind, or (niy)?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=4978030&s=81f6090938eef19dc2ef1a3ad8039924>;
 @_rihabbx, 16/4/2014)

All three languages have the possibility of using an interrogative tag after the yes/no question. Such tags are also very common in rhetorical questions. In Moroccan Arabic, this tag is *walla* ‘or’, e.g.

³ The poster refers to the fact that she is on the Internet forum during work.

⁴ Only in two villages in the far west of the Tarifiyt speaking area *waš* is used, while Senhaja has *ka* (Lafkioui 2007, map 292). I found no instances of *ka* as an interrogative in the MFD corpus.

- (5) rak gadam wela? o sport ket trinie shwija wela walo?
 /rɑ-k xəddam wəlla? u sport ka-ttrini šwiya wəlla walu?/
 ‘do you work or (wəlla)? and sports, do you train a bit or not at all?(wəlla walu)’
 ([http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=3815863&page=3](http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=3815863&page=3;); @____, 28/4/2011)

In Tarifiyt Berber, the clause-final tag is either *ma* (the same as the pre-clausal interrogative marker) or *niy* (‘or’). While both seem to be possible all over the Rif, *ma* is more common in its western part (region of A Hoceima), while *niy* is more common in the east (region of Nador). Some examples:

- (6) Etaa7em 3aa Maghreb meh? /a tāhəm yā rməyriḥ ma?/
 ‘are you going to Morocco, (ma)?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=3861342&page=3>; @Aardbeitje, 27/5/2011)
- (7) Dayesh shen zjoeh nig rougaa ash shwazadeg mekla nigh?
 /ḍayəš ša n žžuʃ niy, řux-a? a aš-swəžḍəy makla niy?/
 ‘Are you a bit hungry or (niy), now? shall I prepare food for you or (niy)?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=4586423&page=45>; @Marokkaanse20-, 3/4/2013)

In Indigenous Dutch (especially of the western part of the Netherlands), the most common interrogative tag is probably *dan* ‘than’, e.g.

- (8) mag dat dan?
 ‘is that allowed than (dan)?’
 (<http://forum.girlscene.nl/forum/beauty-health-hair/beugel-wel-niet-nemen-99554.50.html>; @xSophieex, 31/5/2009)

An interesting situation is found with the Dutch tag *of zo* ‘or something’. Both with interrogative and non-interrogative clauses, *of zo* expresses that the speaker does not commit himself to the exact wording of the clause, and that similar alternatives are also possible.

- (9) Neem je dat allemaal op ofzo?
 ‘Are you recording all that or something like that (of zo)?’
 (<http://forum.fok.nl/topic/2066115>, 18/1/2014)

In Moroccan Dutch, however, *of zo* seems to be much more often used as a question tag than in Indigenous Dutch. This may be due to a different meaning, which translates Moroccan Arabic *wəlla* and Tarifiyt Berber *niy*. Instead of leaving open the possibility of a slightly different alternative, it may soften the question as a whole,⁵ e.g.

- (10) meen je dat ofzo?
 ‘do you mean that, or something (of zo)?’
 (<http://www.maroc.nl/forums/wie-schrijft-blijft/352311-44-dagen-3.html>; @DeoVolente, 4/7/2012)

3. Yes/no interrogatives in Moroccan Flavored Dutch

In Moroccan Flavored Dutch, interrogative constructions using Moroccan materials are well attested. These constructions use a Moroccan pre-clausal interrogative particle, Moroccan interrogative tags, or a combination of these.

⁵ In practice, however, it is extremely difficult to decide for each case whether one or the other interpretation is intended, and a different interpretation of the higher frequency of *of zo* in MFD is certainly possible.

Clause-initial interrogatives

In MFD, the clause-initial interrogative particle—when present—is almost always Moroccan Arabic *waš*, e.g.

- (11) wash is dit normaal?

‘*waš* is this normal?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=4669339&s=81b76de4d1b01d8530093f72e9e20fed>; @Mocro_tram, 16/5/2013)

Berber *ma* is only rarely encountered as a clause-initial interrogative, e.g.

- (12) Meh ben jij 12 jaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar?

‘*ma* are you 12 years old?’

(<http://www.chaima.nl/stel-jezelf-voor/40634-beter-elkaar-leren-kennen.html>; @AlHoceimaMeid, 3/8/2008)

Moroccan clause-initial interrogatives can be combined with Dutch *of zo*, e.g.

- (13) wash kijk je nooit voetbal ofzo??

‘*waš* don’t you ever watch football or something?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1476077&s=2e08541f6904ec33646283b5d010e202>; @Jebbie, 20/6/2007)

- (14) meh ben je gek ofzo

‘*ma* are you crazy or something?’

(<http://www.chaima.nl/verhalen/2154-dik-lelijk-meisje-naar-mooi-slanke-meisje-35.html?langid=1>; @lady_marocc, 10/11/2006)

Clause-final interrogative tags

The Moroccan Arabic clause-final interrogative tag *walla* and the Tarifiyt Berber clause-final tags *niy* and *ma* are frequently encountered in MFD, e.g.

- (15) zal ik maar gaan rusten wela

‘shall I take a rest *walla*?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1491920&page=18>; @haka_marok, 5/7/2007)

- (16) heb jij ook shien chik nigh??

‘do you also have *šin* (some) chick *niy*?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1439758&page=19>; @nadia_den Haag, 26/9/2007)

- (17) EN... WAREN ZE LKKER MEH???

‘and... did they taste well *ma*?’

(<http://www.chaima.nl/kletsboekje/3768-lekkere-donuts.html?langid=1>; @*PrinCesSa*, 30/9/2006)

The Moroccan Arabic construction is also sometimes used by Berber speakers. One telling example is a passage where a (Berber) poster translates a Tarifiyt Berber expression used by his father with *ma* ... *niy* into MFD with the Moroccan Arabic elements *waš* ... *walla*:

- (18) MA TZEDGED DINI NIGH??? (wesh woon je daar oeleh)

ma tẓeddyəḡ dinni niy?

‘*ma* do you live there *niy*? (*waš* do you live there *walla*)’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=4350914&page=13>; @natos1001, 31/7/2012)

Moroccan Arabic used by Berber speakers may be behind some instances of interrogative constructions with a tag *waš*. As far as I know, such a tag does neither exist in Moroccan Arabic nor in Tarifiyt Berber. It may be interpreted as a literal translation of Tarifiyt Berber *ma*, which functions both as a clause-initial question marker and as a tag, cf. the following sentence by a poster with a Tarifiyt Berber background:

- (19) En wat kom je hier doen wesh?
 ‘so what are you doing here *waš*?’
 (<http://www.chaima.nl/verhalen/53406-laait-zien-waarvoor-ik-leef-143.html>; @Nadoriia, 8/4/2009)

Combinations of Moroccan clause-initial and clause-final markers

In MFD, the Moroccan clause-initial interrogative marker can be combined with Moroccan tags. In many cases, a Moroccan Arabic tag is combined with Moroccan Arabic *waš*, e.g.

- (20) Wash moet ik je uitkledem wellaaa??
 ‘*waš* should I undress you *wəlla*?’
 (<http://www.chaima.nl/verhalen/57767-nieuww-verhaaal-bang-om-haar-kwijt-teraken-4.html?langid=1>; @Oujdiia_009, 5/6/2009)

- (21) Wash wil je dat ik me kettingzaag pak wella?
 ‘*waš* do you want me to get my chain saw *wəlla*?’
 (<http://www.chaima.nl/verhalen/90675-no-paparazzi-please-52.html>; @HoneyGirl, 18/12/2010)

Among the rare cases where the clause-initial Tarifiyt Berber interrogative marker *ma* is used, one also finds cases with a Berber interrogative tag, e.g.

- (22) Meh ga je weer naar Marokko nigh? :/
 ‘*ma* are you going to Morocco again *niy*?’
 (<http://www.maroc.nl/forums/wie-schrijft-blijft/199178-sportfreak-jouw-hulp-nodig.html>; @Tamza_Tirelli, 2/9/2006)

Mixed constructions

In addition to the constructions where an Arabic clause-initial particle is combined with an Arabic tag and the rare cases of a Berber clause-initial particle combined with a Berber tag, one also finds lots of examples where the Arabic particle *waš* is combined with a Berber interrogative tag, e.g.

- (23) wesh WOON jij in het ziekenhuis nigh
 ‘*waš* do you LIVE in the hospital *niy*?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=3934322&page=388>; @jackjustice, 18/10/2011)
- (24) wash blijven jullie overnachten nigh
 ‘*waš* are you staying overnight *niy*?’
 (<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1826534&page=11>; @Trotse_Berber, 1/5/2008)
- (25) Wesh denk jij kerst is halal meh
 ‘*waš* do you think Christmas is halal *ma*?’
 (<https://twitter.com>; @GoeieMocro, 24/12/2013)

Interestingly, the Berber tag *niy* sometimes pops up in Dutch Moroccan Arabic posts, e.g.

- (26) Btw wesh darbek hmar nigh? /*waš ɖəɾb-ək ɣmar niy?*/
 ‘By the way, *waš* has a donkey hit you *niy*?’⁶
 (<https://twitter.com>; @Kruushkop, retweeted by @meknessia_, 13/1/2013)

⁶ @Kruushkop has a Berber background, but does not know Berber, cf. another tweet: *Ik ben gewoon een berber, maar ik kan geen berbers* ‘I am just a Berber, but I don’t know Berber’ (<https://twitter.com>; @Kruushkop, 16/6/2013).

Dutch syntax in MFD questions

As mentioned already, Dutch uses verb-initial word order in order to mark yes/no questions. As can be seen in the examples above, this word order is maintained in MFD constructions with *waš*. This can be interpreted in two ways. The easiest way is to assume that the Moroccan elements are basically wrapped around the normal Dutch sentence, that is, that not only Moroccan question marking is used, but that it is combined with the Dutch marking, which is word order. The main reason to hold on to this interpretation is that questions without *waš* are also very common in Moroccan Dutch discourse, so there is no inherent problem in assuming the Dutch interrogative construction also in sentences with *waš*.

The second possible interpretation, which is not necessarily incompatible with the first, is related to the fact that in Dutch in most non-subordinated clauses that are not yes/no interrogatives the verb takes second position. The first position is occupied by some other element, often the subject of the sentence, but objects and adjuncts are possible and frequent. In content questions, it is generally the question word that takes the first position. This is also the case in MFD, e.g.

(27) *wie heeft shi vette album van cheb mami*

‘who has *ši* (some) awesome album by Cheb Mami?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=2679254&s=230d448ae7ae2d04a32effef07a37298>; @shakib, 25/6/2009)

One could interpret Moroccan Arabic *waš* as a question word, and consider the word order in the Dutch part of the sentence the effect of the presence of *waš*.

It should be noted, however, that some MFD interrogative sentences have different syntax, in which the verb is in the second position after *waš*, i.e. as if the Dutch part were an assertive clause, e.g.

(28) *Wash je denkt dat ik 13 jaar ben wela*

‘*Waš* you think I am 13 years old *wəlla*?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=1216436&page=7>; @Peach, 5/12/2006)

This is clearly less common than the construction in which the verb follows *waš* immediately, but it shows that some variation is possible at this point.

4. Crossing

As shown by Dorleijn & Nortier (2008), MFD is not only used within the Moroccan community, but also crosses to other communities (for the concept of crossing, cf. Rampton 1995). The element *waš* is quite prominent among crossed MFD features, e.g. the following question by a poster who is not Moroccan (probably indigenous Dutch), but who has many Moroccan friends, as shown by other posts.

(29) *wesh ben jij waarzegger ofwat*

‘*waš* are you a fortune-teller or what?’

(<http://ask.fm/CR7SR>, July 2015)

In the following contribution to Twitter by a Turkish member, *waš* is combined with Dutch-Turkish code-switched discourse:

(30) *wesh denkje senden korkicam*

‘*waš* do you think *senden korkicam* (that I am afraid)?’

(<https://twitter.com>; retweeted by @Saaiitt, 26/12/2012)

5. Unexpected uses of *waš*

Not all uses of *waš* in MFD are as expected from Moroccan Arabic. Most prominent among these unexpected uses is the combination of *waš* with a content question. In such sentences, *waš* is immediately followed by a Dutch question word. Examples:

- (31) Vonden jullie dat moeilijk? Wesh wat doen jullie op school?!

‘You found that difficult? *Waš* what do you do in school?!’

(<http://www.chaima.nl/kletshoekje/81645-sba7-el-khair-3.html>; @Yuzar, 7/7/2010)

- (32) eerst een vraagje wesh hoe oud ben je??????

‘first a little question: *waš* how old are you?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=30327&page=3>; @Hansie, 29/11/2002)

- (33) wesh waar ga je naartoe?

‘*waš* where are you going?’

(<http://forums.marokko.nl/showthread.php?t=3307642&s=3279f7a2cc6338a50cfc52be71a397ec>; @Ladylicious--, 15/6/2010)

In a few cases, the element *waš* does not function as a marker of interrogation at all, and seems to be a general interjection, e.g.

- (34) Doet echt fucking veel pijnnnnn en je kan er helemaal niks aan doen pff ben vaak naar verschillende dokters geweest ze geven me gewoon pillen wesh ben geen junkieeeeeeeee:‘

‘It f*** hurts and there is nothing you can do about it, pff, (I) have been often to several doctors and they just give me pills, *waš* (I)’m not a drugs addict.’

(<http://forum.rkempo.nl/wat-te-doen.t6385/>; @WHATEVER_, 27 mrt 2012)

Similar exceptional uses are found in crossing, e.g. the following tweet from a woman with a Serbian background (shown by other tweets in Serbian) where *waš* is clearly not interrogative:

- (35) Wesh heb omweg bus genome nu stukje nr osso lopen

‘*Waš* (I) took a detour bus, now (I have to) walk a bit home’

(<https://twitter.com/itsmesanelax>, 10/1/2013)

There are a number of ways to explain such uses, which are different from what is found either in Moroccan Arabic or in Tarifiyt Berber.

a. The construction arose from the take-over of Moroccan Arabic *waš* by Tarifiyt Berber speakers, some of whom have only minimal knowledge of Moroccan Arabic. In such a situation it is conceivable that *waš* was interpreted as a general marker of questions rather than as a specific marker of yes/no interrogation. This means of course that *waš* was not interpreted as equivalent to Berber *ma*, which may be because it is much less frequent in discourse than *waš*.

b. A second possibility is that it stems from eastern Moroccan Arabic, where *waš* is not only used as a yes/no interrogative marker, but also—competing with other forms—as the question word ‘what’ (Heath 2002: 477). In this case, one can imagine that ‘what’ evolved into a general expression of surprise or even more general expressivity, which would be easy to combine with question word questions. A similar development is found in colloquial French where the Algerian Arabic element *waš* ‘what’ (not used in yes/no interrogatives) has become a general expressive word.⁷ One major problem with this explanation is that the more common eastern Moroccan Arabic word meaning ‘what’, *wašta*, is not found in the corpus in combination with Dutch question words.

c. A third possibility is that the reinterpretation of *waš* as an expressive marker took place in crossing. Members of other communities without knowledge of Moroccan languages remarked the use of *waš* in Moroccan Dutch discourse, but interpreted it as an element which is both vague and

⁷ I wish to thank Jacomine Nortier who pointed this out to me, cf. <http://fr.urbandictionary.com>. Direct influence from French is improbable, as, at least in the Netherlands, French is not widely known.

expressive (see explanation b). As such users are of course in contact with the Moroccan Dutch speakers, the latter may have taken over this new meaning.

6. Conclusion

The study of yes/no interrogatives in Moroccan Flavored Dutch presents us with a number of highly interesting phenomena. In the first place, syntactically Dutch questions are combined with Moroccan Arabic and/or Berber clause-initial and clause-final elements. In the second place, the choice to use Arabic or Berber elements does not entirely depend on the linguistic background of the user. In the third place, there are often blended forms where the clause-initial particle is Arabic, while the interrogative tag is Berber. Finally, it comes out that the clause-initial particle has taken up new usages which are foreign to Moroccan Arabic and Tarifiyt Berber.

All this shows that, within the Moroccan Dutch community, MFD is a linguistic code of its own, which has its own structures and conventions, and whose features have dynamics that are only partly dependent on the heritage language.

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