

The Plurilingual Repertoire of the Comorian Community in Marseille: Remarks on Status and Function Based on Selected Sociolinguistic Biographies

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s a large number of the Comorians, about a sixth of the approx. 600000 Comorians in total – from all four islands (Grande Comore, Mohéli, Anjouan, Mayotte) - have moved to France, mainly to Marseille and Bordeaux. Migration, though has not been a new phenomenon at that time, the history of the Comoro Islands has been closely linked to Madagascar, the other islands in the Indian Ocean (La Réunion, Seychelles, Madagascar), the Arabian Peninsula (mainly Oman) and especially with the East African Swahili coast including Zanzibar. In France, the Comorians are numerous, but compared to others immigrants, e.g. from Tunisia or Morocco, they are numerically few, and as Direche-Slimani & Le Houérou wrote in 2002, «invisible immigrants.» Therefore the French regard the Comorians as an «unproblematic» group. Most of the Comorians in Marseille live in the *Quartiers Nord*, an area mainly inhabited by immigrants.

With increasing migration and globalization languages and language usage it is becoming more important for identity construction of groups and individuals. In a monolingual nation state multilingualism is considered to be an exception and experienced with an according Habitus (Hu 2003: 2). In this paper the *plurilingual mode* (Matras 2009) of Comorian speakers in Marseille was assumed to be the unmarked case. Based on this assumption, Matras points out that multilingual speakers do not simply switch off a language, but use one of the specific languages in the repertoire preferentially depending on context and where there are constraints on the language choice.

In the following the status and subsequent prestige that speakers ascribe to the different language varieties will be illustrated. This also entails the functionality of the languages and varieties in their particular contexts. The Comoro islands' linguistic setting reflects its history; apart from the Comorian varieties, Arabic and Swahili have been prominent since early seafaring and trade interactions. Since French colonization, the French language has become equally important. Thus, for the already plurilingual Comorian first generation immigrants, migration to France was not a traumatic experience with respect to an unknown language. Instead, Comorians found and find themselves in an environment, which is characterized and dominated by a code (French) that Comorian speakers already have at their disposal owing to their plurilingual repertoire.

2. History of Migration

The first recorded migration from the Comoro Islands to France (Direche-Slimani & Le Houérou 2002:40) occurred in the 1940s when Comorians were hired by the French merchant shipping and later settled in France. In the 1950s many of the Comorians settled in France after working conditions in shipping business worsened and they were hired as dock workers in Marseille. Today they are considered by the Comorians as the pioneers of Comorian migration to France. After independence of the Comoro Islands from France a large number of Comorians settled in France, mainly the partners

and children of those first immigrants. The first immigrants mainly settled in three districts of the city center in Marseille (e.g. in *Le Panier*). However, during the 1960s the municipality of Marseille constructed huge apartment buildings in the northern areas of the city and many Comorians moved to those *Quartiers Nord* as they offered modern and more comfortable housing. The Comorians organized themselves in many associations, set up Koranic schools, work- and common rooms.

Today, most Comorians are still living in the *Quartiers Nord*, like many other immigrants (mainly from Northern Africa) in difficult conditions as the buildings haven't been renovated since they were built. The *Quartiers Nord* is a highly multicultural and socially underprivileged area in comparison to the other districts of Marseille. The number of Comorian associations have increased, Direche-Slimani & Le Houérou (2002:50) assume that there are about 300 associations, mostly of them linked with a certain village or town on the Comoro Islands. One of my informants in Marseille cynically said that each and every village would have a representative association in Marseille. The life of the Comorians in Marseille is closely linked with the associations and the family on the Comoro Islands.

The exact number of the Comorians living in Marseille couldn't be determined, neither my informants nor the municipality of Marseille were able to give a precise number. It is estimated that there are between 80'000 and 100'000 (e.g. Direche-Slimani & Le Houérou 2002, Bertoncello 2000) Comorians living in Marseille.

3. Data and Methods

The empirical data (questionnaires, qualitative interviews and transcripts of recorded group discussions between females originating from different islands) were collected in September 2011 and February 2012 and have been analyzed with sociolinguistic and linguistic parameters. The informants were all female, first generation migrants and they all lived in the *Quartiers Nord*.

4. The sociolinguistic situation on the Comoro Islands

Today there are mostly four varieties that are distinguished according to their usage on the islands: Shingazidja (of Grande Comore), Shimwali (of Mohéli), Shindzuani (of Anjouan) and Shimaore (of Mayotte).¹ From a structural point of view two are each identified as being closer to one another, thus there are the eastern and the western varieties (see e.g. Ahmed-Chamanga & Gueunier 1977, Rombi & Alexandre 1982, Ahmed-Chamanga 1992 & 2010, Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993, Full 2006).

Even before the Comorians migrate to France they are multilingual. Laroussi (2010: 31) describes the sociolinguistic situation as « pluriculturelle et plurilingue. » This finding can be transferred to the situation on all four islands because Mayotte is, from a historical and geographical point of view, part of the Comorian archipelago. Also the history of the settlement is comparable to a great extent. « La civilisation swahilie, issue de la rencontre du monde bantou, de l'Afrique de l'Est et des musulmans venues surtout de Chiraz et de la péninsule arabique, a profondément influencé Mayotte » (Laroussi 2010: 28). Even though Laroussi refers only to Mayotte, the situation appears to be the same in the whole archipelago. Ben Ali (1985: 13) described a similar history of settlement for Grande Comore, where after the Persian migration towards the Comoro Islands groups from Eastern Africa and Madagascar migrated to the Comoro Islands: « [...] et à partir des VIII^e et IX^e siècles, l'archipel a vu arriver d'importantes populations bantoues, et, dès la fin de XV^e, des ethnies malgaches (Sakalava paiens et Antalaotsy islamisés) [...] » (Laroussi 2010: 27). Ahmed-Chamanga (1992: 13) points out that there also have been movements between the Comoro Islands, and states that Shindzuani would be that variety which is best understood by all Comorians: « En raison de la surpopulation de leur île, les Anjouanais ont émigré au cours de l'histoire vers les autres îles de l'archipel comorien: la langue anjouanaise est ainsi le parler le mieux compris des Comores, et le plus particulièrement à Mayotte et à Mohéli. »

The history of settlement did not leave only cultural but also linguistic traces. Therefore not only the Comorian varieties but also the immigrant languages are significant to understand today's sociocultural situation on the Comoro Islands. The period as a French protectorate and colony brought

¹ Full (2006) suggests a fifth variety, Shikombani.

forth the importance of French, which is today's only official language in Mayotte². On the other islands Arabic and French are official languages together with their respective Comorian variety. Even though the Comorian varieties are also used on administrative level, the usage of this language is restricted as there does not exist an accepted standard orthography for any of the varieties.

The existence of Islam as the dominant religion explains the importance of the Arabic language: « Les écoles coraniques sont fréquentées par la plus grande partie de la population » (Ahmed-Chamanga/Gueunier 1977: 216). However, many authors argue that the (active) linguistic competence in Arabic is limited: « cet enseignement se limite à l'alphabétisation en caractères arabes et à la mémorisation de textes plus ou moins nombreux. Rares sont ceux qui parlent réellement l'arabe. » Nevertheless the population shows a very positive language attitude towards Arabic.

In the first half of the 19th century migrants from Madagascar settled in Mayotte, they assimilated and learned Shimaore, but in addition kept their own language, Malagasy. « Ce mouvement linguistique malgache a pris fin au XIX^e siècle; la langue s'est bien installée dans la culture locale. Curieusement, aujourd'hui, les villages kibushiphones sont implantés dans le sud et sur la côte ouest de Mayotte » (Laroussi 2010: 32). The Comorians usually refer to this language as Shibushi. Gueunier (1986: 4-5) distinguishes two varieties: Shibushi, the main variety, and Antalaotsy, a variety spoken in three villages. Madi (2010: 58), Laroussi (2010), and Jaquin (2010) divide this distinction into two varieties: kibushi kimaore and kisakalava kimaore.

On all four islands the Comorian language varieties are in a coexisting and competing relationship with French. Despite the official status of the respective Comorian language variety (and Arabic), French is the sole medium of instruction in public schools. Laroussi (2010: 63) states for Mayotte « Aujourd'hui elle [French] commence à devenir la langue de tous les Mahorais. »

French can also be seen as a competitor to Swahili, both languages are from a functional point of view fundamental for external communication. Even though Swahili cannot be considered as an autochthonous language of the Comoro Islands, the language does play an important role. Swahili has served and is still serving as Lingua Franca for trade between the Arabic Peninsula, the East African Coast and the Comoro Islands. Swahili played a major role before colonization³ and in the struggle for independence during the 1960s, when the Comorians living in Tanzania were broadcasting in the Comorian varieties and Swahili to reach their comrades on the Islands⁴. Though Ben Ali/ Elhad (1984: 12) argue that French is becoming the new Lingua Franca: « [...] depuis plusieurs décades, le français, comme langue de communication internationale, a remplacé le kiswahili », Omar (1984: 12) estimates that presently approximately 1% of the Comorians living on the Comoro Islands speak Swahili, but adds « wengi wa Wakomoro wanaifahamu lugha hii ingawa hawaitumii sana. »

Rombi & Alexandre (1982:19) point out that it cannot be assumed the Comorians do understand (Standard) Swahili: « les comorien ne comprennent directement aucun parler côtier, ni ne sont compris par les locuteurs d'aucun de ses parlars. » Eastman (1971) addresses the question of who is a Mswahili and to what extent the language Swahili is the defining criteria. She says that the language of a Mswahili is almost always going to be a different kind of Swahili from the variety spoken by oneself, « even if different in only one or a few features of contrast » (Eastman 1971: 232). She argues that the definition of being a Mswahili is not based on linguistic criteria: « The people referred to as WaSwahili are not so called on a linguistic basis alone. The term MSwahili (pl. WaSwahili) varies with the time and place of reference apart from the individual using the term. » Her argument was based on two interviews, one of them with a Zanzibari woman with Comorian roots who considers herself as being a

² Since 31st of March 2011, Mayotte is the 5th overseas department of France and therefore part of the European Union.

³ "Le Swahili fut, avant la colonisation et dans ses premiers temps, la langue des relations extérieures, encore que l'imprécision des documents dont nous disposons ne permette pas toujours de déterminer si les auteurs se réfèrent à un swahili qui serait un peu « provincialisé » ou à l'une des langues comoriennes définies plus haut. De nos jours, le swahili est surtout pratiqué par ceux, très nombreux, qui ont vécu en Afrique orientale; il est compris plus largement encore, notamment grâce à l'audience de la radio tanzanienne. Pour ces raisons, et du fait de son étroite parenté avec le comorien, le swahili ne peut être considéré comme une langue véritablement étrangère aux Comores" Ahmed-Chamanga/Gueunier (1977: 216).

⁴ "Hapo ndipo lugha ya Kikomoro na Kiswahili zilipata uwezo tena wa kujongeleana karibu na maneno mapya yalianza kutumika katika upande wa kisiasa ndani ya lugha ya Kikomoro kupitia Redio-Tanzania" (Omar 2004: 100).

Mswahili. For Eastman's interview partner the origin of the father is a crucial factor: « An African whose father was an indigenous African and whose mother was a native of the Comoro islands is still referred to as MSwahili. On the other hand, if the father or both parents came from the Comoro Islands, the child is not an MSwahili even if he and his siblings were born on Zanzibar. Even descendants of people who came from the Comoros five or six generations back are not regarded as true Swahili people » (Eastman 1971: 233). After her analysis of the sometimes contradictory statements of her interview partners Eastman argues that the definition of being a Mswahili is considered to be relative and therefore difficult: « [...] there are groups of people, such as Comorians, to whom none of the labels in my analysis directly apply. They are no more Arab or African than Swahili – they are Comorian. Culturally however, they fit into the analysis more as Swahili than as non-Swahili » (Eastman 1971: 234).

Based on the above, the potential linguistic repertoire of a Comorian can include at least one of the Comorian varieties, and French, Arabic, Shibushi and Swahili. In the following the languages and varieties within this plurilingual repertoire will be analyzed under a new condition, namely an individual now living in France. On the basis of some selected linguistic biographies status and function of these languages will be illustrated.

5. Status, prestige and function of the languages and varieties in Marseille

5.1. Comorian varieties and Shibushi

M⁵ displays a diverse linguistic background. She was born on Grande Comore but her family moved to Madagascar when she was a small child. Her father was from Madagascar, speaking Shibushi, while her mother was from Grande Comore having Shingazidja as L1. M. states that she mainly spoke Shibushi as a child but also learned Créole after she and her family moved to La Réunion when she was 12 years old. She moved to France at the age of 16 while the family moved back to Madagascar. When asked where she comes from, her first statement was that she is from Chouani on Grande Comore, even though she left that place when she was only one month old. So today her main point of reference for identity is her village of origin, where she has never been. She says that the languages she uses most nowadays are French in France and Shibushi when she speaks with her family on the phone. M. states very clearly that she considers herself as Comorian and therefore in Marseille she would speak Shingazidja with other Comorians; she is even able to switch to the other varieties if necessary. She describes her linguistic repertoire as a mixture of everything and explains that when her children would hear her talking on the phone with the family in Madagascar they ask her why she would talk in such a strange way:

⁶« Je parle le Shingazidja. Avec mes frères, ma famille qui est à Madagascar, je parle le Shibushi, parce que j'ai des frères qui ne savent pas parler Shingazidja, et j'ai des frères qui parlent le Shingazidja. Donc avec ceux qui savent pas parler Shingazidja je parle le Shibushi et l'autres je parle Shibushi, Shingazidja, Français. Je mélange tous. De temps en temps il y mes enfants qui rigolent "Mais maman pourquoi tu parles comme ça?". Il y a des mots la-bàs que j'oublie donc je comprends l'autre et je mélange tous. »⁷

M. also states that in fact she only really learned to speak Shingazidja – the language through which she identifies herself – in France. She says that she was always able to understand it, as her mother spoke Shingazidja to her, but her parents spoke Shibushi to each other and Shibushi was the language at home:

⁵ Age 43, female, born on Grande Comore, lived in Madagascar and La Réunion, Interview: 13.2.2012.

⁶ For reasons of readability the transcripts follow the standard French orthography. For reasons of authenticity typical oral and non-standard realizations, e.g. the deletion of the negation particle *ne* have been retained.

⁷ I speak Shingazidja. With my brothers, my family which lives in Madagascar, I speak Shibushi because I have brothers who don't speak Shingazidja, and I have brothers who speak Shingazidja. Therefore with those who can't speak Shingazidja I speak Shibushi and with the others I speak Shibushi, Shingazidja, French. I mix everything. Sometimes my children are laughing "Mom why are you speaking like that?" There are words which I forget but I know others and I mix everything."

« On oublie, comme le Shingazidja, je savais pas bien le parler quand j'étais à Madagascar, j'ai parlé que le Shibushi tout ça, mais quand je suis venue ici en France, j'ai parlé avec les gens et maintenant je sais le parler. En fait j'ai appris le Shingazidja en France. »⁸

F⁹ also describes her linguistic performance as mixed when it concerns her private life, e.g. when she writes a shopping list:

« Je mélange. Parce qu'avec le pain c'est facile à écrire *le pain* en Français que de faire *mkate* en Shingazidja. Donc ça dépend de ce que c'est, parce que si je vais aller acheter le sucre je l'écrirai en Shingazidja parce que c'est facile, c'est vite fait - *sukari* en Arabe, et après *allumette* je vais le mettre en Français parce que c'est difficile à écrire *ibiriti*, le temps de l'écrire *ibiriti* c'est longue. Alors ma liste pour les commissions c'est mélangée. »¹⁰

While M. states that she would mix the languages, as she feels that she sometimes lacks the competence to cover all domains in all languages, F. shows a completely different motivation for mixing. F. states that in writing she would simply use the language she considers to be more efficient for a specific item on the shopping list but also adds that she does have a preference for a specific language in certain cases and explains that this choice depends on whether she considers these items to belong more to the French life, like *le pain* (she refers to a baguette) or more belonging to the Comorian lifestyle, like coconuts, where she would use the word *nazi* on the shopping list. In addition to her usage of Shingazidja and French within the same shopping list she also uses different alphabets, the arabic one for Shingazidja and the latin one for French.

Both M. and F. consider Shingazidja to be a « dialect only » of Comorian and give their variety not the attribute being a real language. Both use the term Comorian on the one hand as a synonym for Shingazidja and on the other hand to refer to all Comorian varieties. F. explains her point of view:

« La dialect Comorien, c'est la langue maternelle, Comore, Shingazidja. Oui Shikomori, Shingazidja c'est ... je ne sais pas comment je l'appelle moi, parce que on peut l'appeler en deux façons: Shingazidja, Shikomor. C'est la même chose pour moi. [...] Personnellement, dans ma tête ces deux mots qui disent la même chose. Shikomor, Shingazidja. En premier j'utilise Shingazidja. Et après c'est vrai avec le Comorien c'est un peu pour les quatres îles, mais Shingazidja ça veut dire que c'est uniquement sur l'île de la Grande Comore. [...] quand je dis Shingazidja ça veut dire que dans la Grande Comore. On a jamais posé la question mais on peut dire que Shikomor c'est tout le monde mais j'emploi le Shikomor ou bien le Shingazidja. [...] »¹¹

The definition of their own variety always is linked of the definition of the other varieties. All informants explain differences between the varieties, but point out at the same time that they can communicate with Comorians from other islands. M. considers all varieties to be equally comprehensible if there is a discussion between Comorians from all islands and states:

⁸ “One forgets, like with Shingazidja, I couldn't speak it very well when I lived in Madagascar, I only spoke Shibushi but when I came here to France, I spoke to people and now I know it. In fact I have learned Shingazidja in France.”

⁹ Age 50, female, born in Itsandzani (Grande Comore) lives in France since 20 years, Interview: 16.2.2012.

¹⁰ “I mix. Because with the bread, it is easier to write *le pain* in French than to write *mkate* in Shingazidja. Therefore it depends on what it is because if I am going to buy sugar I would write it in Shingazidja because it is easy, it is quickly done – *sukari* en Arabe, and then matches I will write it in French because it is difficult to write *ibiriti*, it takes a long time to write *ibiriti*. So my shopping list is mixed.”

¹¹ The Comorian dialect is the mother tongue, Comorian, Shingazidja. Yes Shikomori, Shingazidja it is... I don't know how I call it, because one can call it in two different ways ; Shingazidja, Shikomo. It is the same for me. [...] In my head both words have the same meaning. Shikomor, Shingazidja. As a start I use Shingazidja. And then, it is true, with the Comorian it is used for all for islands but Shingazidja means it is only spoken in Grande Comore. [...] When I use Shingazidja it means [the language] from Grande Comore. One has never asked me this question but one could say that Shikomor is everybody but I speak Shikomor or even Shingazidja.”

« On mélange tous les langues, on parle les tous, Comorien, Mahorais, Anjouanais, on mélange. »¹²

F. considers Shimaore to be more difficult to understand, but still emphasizes that communication is possible:

« Je parle pas bien bien, mais je sais de passer la communication avec le Shindzuani et le Maore, pas tout, il y a des mots je comprends pas aussi. Mais j'essaie de m'intégrer sûr le dialecte aussi. [...] C'est difficile. Surtout le Maore, parce que il y a des mots qui viennent de la Madagascar ou des mots que j'ai du mal à comprendre mais le Shindzuani c'est à peu près la même chose que le Comorien. C'est à peu près il y a des mots qui sont différents mais on arrive bien à se comprendre, oui. »¹³

All interview partners who migrated from the Comoro Islands to Marseille mention explicitly that all Comorian Varieties are considered to be equally important and valuable. F. describes a discussion between women from all four islands and says that everybody would speak their own variety and try their best to understand the others, and that no variety would dominate the others.

Ma¹⁴ grew up in France, her mother is French, and her father an immigrant from Grande Comore with Shingazidja as L1¹⁵. Ma. considers French to be her only L1 because they only spoke French at home. She is now working for an association developing aid programs on all Comorian Islands and states that she tries not to make a difference between the Comorian varieties by using the term Comorian to integrate everybody. Ma. States she discovered that people would indeed make a difference between themselves by identifying with one variety, and to pretend not to understand the others very well and show contempt towards those from other islands.

In all interviews the informants stress the importance of their Comorian variety for identifying themselves and that it is the language which they prefer to use in private domain and when Comorians come together. F. explains the importance of her L1:

« Personnellement pour me présenter, eh bien, c'est le Shingazidja. Tout à fait, c'est ça. C'est ça que je parle le mieux, c'est ça que je me sens bien de le parler, c'est ça que me fait bien comprendre avec, c'est la chose innée de moi, c'est moi. Le Shingazidja c'est moi. Donc je me sens à l'aise, je le parle, je me sens bien. »¹⁶

All interview partners refer to the immense importance of their L1 for their identification within the community. Therefore one would expect that the Comorian varieties are the languages spoken with children. Interestingly the choice of family language seems to be handled in different ways. Some of them state that they only use the Comorian variety at home while others state that they only use French to enable their children a better linguistic initial position for a prosperous life in an area which is dominated by French. The thoroughly positive attitude towards their own language cracks as soon as it concerns the following generation which grows up in France. All informants using French at home mentioned that it might be wrong not to use Comorian at home because a) they would prevent their children from being able to communicate with their grandparents on the Comoro Islands and b) they would exclude their children from becoming a member in the very widespread Comorian Associations in Marseille. All of them state that therefore they added Comorian as an additional family language

^{12a} "We mix all languages, we speak them all. Comorian tous les langues, on parle les tous, Comorien, Mahorais, Anjouanais, we mix."

¹³ "I don't speak it very well, but I manage a communication with someone speaking Shindzuani or Maore, not everything, there are some words which I also don't understand. But I try to adopt to the dialect [...] It is difficult, especially the Maore, because there are some words which come from Madagascar or words which are difficult to understand, but Shindzuani is more or less the same like Comorian. It is close, there are some words which are different, but we can understand each other well. Yes."

¹⁴ Age 32, female, born in France, Interview: 22.9.2011.

¹⁵ L1 = First language as seen by the interview partners

¹⁶ "For me, to present myself, sure, that is Shingazidja. Yes, that it is. It is what I speak best, it is in which I feel good to talk, it is [the language] with which I can make myself understood, it is the inherent thing, that is me. Shingazidja that's me. I feel good, I speak it. I feel good."

later on. F. illustrates her fight for the usage of her L1 in the family when she realized that her children feel ashamed to speak Shingazidja, even though she tries to understand her children's attitude.

F. later mentions in the interview that she sometimes discovers that children produce new words on the basis of French and Shingazidja, and she hopes that one day her children will regard their L1 as valuable.

In summary the Comorian language varieties (and Shibushi for the descendants of immigrants from Madagascar to the Comoro Islands) are the main criteria to identify themselves as a member of the Comorian Community in France, but as well to distinguish themselves from each other if necessary. The attitude towards their L1 is very positive and it is seen as valuable. From a functional perspective the L1 is used whenever two Comorians come together.

5.2. *French, Swahili and Arabic*

French is the dominant language in Marseille. For those immigrants embedded in French society with a job, French is most important for their daily activities. Many interview partners state that it is the language they use most often. Most Comorians have French as one language within their plurilingual repertoire and no negative statements are made against French. The Comorians consider French to be an important tool to manage life. Nobody identifies themselves via this language; it is a neutral mean of communication, and French is also used when Comorians do not understand each other as F. states:

« Si la communication n'arrive pas passé dans notre langue on se ... en Français parce que on comprend Français. »¹⁷

As previously stated, for those Comorians born in France, French can be the L1 and is a way - at least a linguistic way - of being a member of French society. But in combination with the lack of a Comorian variety in their repertoire, they are excluded from being a member of the Comorian community.

None of the informants mentioned that Swahili served as a Lingua Franca between Comorians from the different islands. On the contrary French has taken this role. Nevertheless all informants show a very positive attitude towards Swahili and list numerous reasons why they consider it to be an important language, even though Swahili seems not to play a role in daily life. All interview partners point to the linguistic relationship between Swahili and the Comorian varieties, many of them explain that Swahili would be « a real language » and that the Comorian varieties would « simply be a dialect » of this language. Their argument is based on the fact that Swahili is a written language and books are available. The Comorians consider Swahili as a written language because there is a standard orthography, which is not the case for the Comorian varieties, even though many Comorians do write their variety. The trade and business relations to the East African Coast and the importance of Swahili for that communication are mentioned by all interview partners. F. mentions that she sometimes watches Tanzania TV stations and therefore would understand Swahili very well. She also points out that Swahili could be strengthened in France and serve as a unifying language for all Comorians. She says that

« le Shingazidja si, c'est une dialecte, Swahili c'est une langue qui se représente, qui c'est lu par tous, qui c'est connue par tous. »¹⁸

Arabic as a written language is important for the Comorians living in Marseille. All respondents stated that they learned to write (but not to talk) in a Koranic school on the Comoro Islands and most of them use the Arabic script to write the Comorian varieties. Many Comorians state that attending the Koranic school in Marseille is « compulsory » for their children, not by law, but that it is a social expectation. Arabic, though not spoken by most Comorians, is seen as an integral part of the plurilingual repertoire because a) the script serves to write the L1 and b) it is the language used to practice their religion to which many of the sociocultural events are closely linked.

¹⁷ “If the communication doesn't work in our language we... in French because we understand French.”

¹⁸ Shingazidja yes, that is a dialect, Swahili is a language which represents, which is read by everybody, which is known by all.

None of the above mentioned languages covers all domains of an individual being; rather these languages have to be considered as codes and components of ONE repertoire. Therefore the situation cannot be treated as a polyglossic one, where these different languages do have a different function depending on the context. Not all Comorians do have the same repertoire (e.g. different L1). Therefore the functions of the codes vary, as can be illustrated with French. French can serve as a neutral mean of communication in case of communicative problems. But if the usage of the Comorian varieties does not cause any communicative limitations, then the usage of French would be considered as a strategy which is opposed to the identity as a member of the Comorian community. In addition there are no clear hierarchic relations between the Comorian varieties, Shibushi, French, Arabic and Swahili. Moreover all languages are an integral part of the entire repertoire.

6. Language and social identity

The use of a language and the identity as a speaker of that language are two aspects which cannot be separated from each other. Busayo Ige (2010:3057) - among others - pointed out that language usage includes the choice of a certain language and that by this choice identity is created: « Identity in many respects is shaped by language and conversely, language choices may relate to identity; Identity, in fact, like language, is both personal and social. » In literature, different terms and distinctions are mentioned in regard of identity and language, very often with the distinction of an individual and a social identity. E.g. Ellinor Ochs (1993:288) defines social identity « as a cover term for a range of social personae, including social statuses, roles, positions, relationships, and institutional and other relevant community identities one may attempt to claim or assign in the course of social life. » The claim and definition of these identities are realized by linguistic acts « in an attempt to construct not only their own identities but the social identities of other interlocutors » (Ochs 1993:289). Bucholtz & Hall (2004:369) mentioned two concepts to be crucial for language and identity: „sameness“ and „difference“, two complementary perspectives of identity.

Comorians in Marseille construct their sameness by a Comorian identity in an opposition to the French or other immigrants. On a linguistic level that is only possible by a unification of all Comorian varieties into one. In addition the definition of a Comorian identity also includes having French and Arabic in the repertoire.

To be part of the numerous associations (the crucial institutions of the Comorian community in the diaspora) an active competence of the own Comorian variety, and linked to that, the passive competence of the other varieties are inalienable. Especially those interview partners who only passed on limited or even no competence of their Comorian variety to their children mentioned the importance of having a Comorian variety as part of the Comorian identity. They all realized that their children are partially excluded from being a member of the associations but also from their relatives (e.g. grandparents) on the Comoro Islands. These children miss one important piece of what defines the Comorian identity. Due to its importance for religious and cultural activities Arabic is an equal important part of the linguistic repertoire and creates the sameness for these spheres of sociocultural life. French, accessible to all members of the community, can be used as Lingua Franca if required. French is considered as neutral, especially when it comes to communication with speakers having Shibushi as L1. The construction of „sameness“ is a binary process as it also creates a difference. Interview partner Al.¹⁹ explains why it is important and even legitimate to use their own language (Shingazidja in her case) with the children:

« Parce que toutes les races parlent leurs langues. Les Chinois ils parlent leur Chinois avec leur enfants, les Arabes c'est pareille, même les Mayottes parlent leur langues avec les enfants. Pourquoi pas nous? »²⁰

By this comparison with Chinese, Arabs and „Mayottes“, Al. creates three other groups and one group with which she identifies herself (“we”). Al. creates a social identity which is defined on

¹⁹ Age 40, female, born in Moindzadza (Grande Comore), Interview: 19.02.2012.

²⁰ “Because all are speaking their languages. The Chinese speak their languages with their children, the same applies to the Arabs, even the Mayottes speak their language with the children. Why shouldn't we?”

linguistic criteria. In addition the “we” group, the Comorians, includes only those migrants from Grande Comore, Mohéli and Anjouan – and therefore also the three varieties of the Comorian – the Comorians from Mayotte (French overseas department) are seen as “others”. Social identity construction through language usage can equally be used to create differences. For the Comorians in Marseille this is an important strategy if it is necessary to emphasize a specific origin from a certain island or even specific village on one of the islands. Interview partners mentioned this point implicit and explicit by their judgment of how easy or difficult the communication would be with Comorians originating from other islands. Nevertheless, all Comorians stressed their mutual appreciation and equality.

7. Conclusion

The Comorian language varieties serve as major criteria for defining a member of the Comorian community. The respective L1 does have a very high prestige and is THE attribute for the construction of identity within the Comorian community. Arabic is an important language within the plurilingual repertoire of all Comorians, serving as a unifying feature. Swahili does not play any role in daily life, but is known by everyone and considered to be the superior language of the Comorian varieties. French has taken the role of being Lingua Franca between Comorians and, in addition, is considered to be a neutral tool in an environment totally dominated by this language.

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