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# **Official Toponyms and Their Dialectal Variants: The Influence of the Dialectal Forms of Moroccan Place Names**

## **Abstract**

Morocco displays strong multilingualism where several languages coexist: Standard Arabic, Berber (Amazigh), French, Spanish, and Moroccan Arabic (Darija) – the vernacular language. Nonetheless, following independence, the country's ideological choices in terms of cultural policy pushed for the Arabization of toponyms. To provide high-quality geographic information, place names should be accurate and identifiable in the field not only by the inhabitants themselves but also by the visitors. Place names are rather close to everyday life and thus used mostly in their vernacular form, denoting phonetic or semantic alterations. Various research has shown the interrelation between dialectology and onomastics, hence the importance of considering dialects in the study of place names. This study aims to investigate whether examining and considering the dialectal variants is essential. It seeks to provide a comprehensive toponymic data set of Morocco, where the motivation is better identification of the place in question by adhering to the correct usage in both written and spoken practice. The onymic items were collected from native speakers of the geographical varieties and oral tradition. The differences in the linguistic features are analyzed, and follow-up investigations will seek to examine whether any discrepancy between the official and the vernacular form of toponym will be observed.

### **Keywords**

dialect, multilingualism, toponymy, variations

## 1. Introduction

Oral dialectal forms and their documentary significance have received little focus worldwide, although “these sources could allow more detailed anthropogeographic and territorial mapping” (Assenza, 2014, p. 972). However, in German and Central European onomastic research, they have been considered as a source for etymology and further analysis, in addition to methodologically, by taking into account their value and the necessity to collect them systematically. A study was thus devised to gather the dialectal names of local toponyms as systematically and thoroughly as possible in order to compare toponymy in cartography and in spoken language.

In today’s society, names are an inextricable aspect of language and our ability to communicate and interact with others. “Names live on across generations” (Lauder & Lauder, 2015, p. 383). “A space becomes place, and a territory becomes landscape through the process of naming”. According to Seidl (2008), toponyms record “human attitudes to space”. They typically mirror the “physical environment, and as such represent a kind of a unifying link between the material, tangible world and our understanding of this space”. Thus, landscape encompasses physical space and how humans discern, interpret, and shape their surroundings. “It is the relationship between people and space in a certain period of time” (Seidl, 2008, p. 35).

Toponyms are linguistic terms that are employed as “single element messages (e.g., on maps and signposts) or – more commonly – as elements of natural language texts (including spoken ones)”. Moreover, they are entangled in the language’s “internal and abstract structure” and its usage, which is then influenced by numerous “extralinguistic influences, such as politics, social phenomena, and culture” (Włoskowicz, 2017, p. 325).

Toponyms are linguistic units that we acquire and remember without going through a rigorous analytical process or paying close attention to their individual components or arrangement. As a result, most individuals are unfamiliar with the whole toponymic corpus. Various elements may explain the naming of spaces or places in their recognizable form since it is a living representation of a geographical, historical, linguistic, or ethnographic structure unique to its location. Moroccan toponymy is being used as a tool for collective memory and identity, for reference and direction, as a symbol, and

for actual or imagined significance. In Morocco and elsewhere, the name can assume various and different forms, which are characterized by a complex nomenclature. Toponyms reveal a lot about a community's language, values, beliefs, environment, economy, and history since these linguistic features express people's fundamental relationship with their home and extensive knowledge of the area. This can be seen especially in the dialectal variants.

## 2. Toponyms and language

Toponyms are, "by their very description, names for places" (Kostanski, 2004, p. 276). They are the linguistic features that refer to a place, be it a city, street, country or other geographical and spatial locations. In other words, they are "the linguistic signs of a natural language denoting certain fragments of topographic space" (Urazmetova & Shamsutdinova, 2017, p. 26).

Toponyms are a representation of the landscape layer that depicts the relationship between "the human perception, understanding and interpretation of the surrounding physical space" (Calvo-Iglesias et al., 2012, p. 502). They contain "traces of the memory of the relationship between Man and Earth" (Cantile, 2016, p. 11), and frequently endure changes in the local area, generating "historical documents of landscape dynamics or changes in land use" (Conedera et al., 2007, p. 729), thus serving as "symbols of regional culture" (Qian et al., 2016, p. 546). Hence, they are a "true reflection of the linguistic history of a particular geographical location" (Ballester et al., 2013, p. 125). Therefore, a toponym is a valuable instrument to characterize variation and trends in cultural and natural landscape features over time.

Language is "paradoxically, among the most unrecognizable factors that contribute to place-making" (Lin & Chen, 2010, p. 68). Place names are "part of the oral literature of the local people". Linguistically, they assist pronunciation and "serve as important links to some other documents and information" (Nna, 2015, p. 181).

"Language (dialect) and culture (cultural space) are dialectically interlocked with each other" (Koyama, 2001, p. 1578). Toponyms reflect the language structure where the "inherited local place-names have been passed

on in a local dialect and have followed the development of that dialect”. Various toponyms “contain frozen grammatical forms representing earlier stages of a dialect” (Særheim, 2014, p. 1403). Place names, particularly topographical appellatives, may reveal a lot about a word’s geographic distribution as well as its semantic value. The phonological and morphological evolution of a dialect and language and an area and nation’s historical and cultural history may all be learned from ancient place names and personal names.

The main languages spoken in Morocco are Arabic, French, and Berber (Amazigh) in all of its varieties. The Moroccan people’s mother tongue is Darija (Moroccan Arabic). It is “spoken by approximately 20 million people and is used in the home and in informal conversation”). In Morocco, classical Arabic is not spoken natively – it is only taught in schools; nonetheless, Arabic dialects are passed down orally through families and social groups. Moroccan Arabic also has regional differences. “These differences may relate to both the pronunciation and the lexicon” Code-switching is a common occurrence in such multilingual societies.

### 3. Methodology

Linguistic-geographic and toponymic studies are inextricably linked; however, relevant knowledge sources may differ significantly. The lexical items to be investigated will be sourced from selected native speakers of the geographical variants of Moroccan Arabic, where the onomastic items will be primarily gathered from oral tradition. In these circumstances, having a bilingual presentation of toponyms offers a unique research case.

This paper aims to construct a geo-linguistic perspective by asking interviewees to specify place names in their native language in order to examine the variety that exists in such a setting. Hence, a corpus of toponyms coined from oral sources in Morocco was analyzed. This study adopted a three-part interview methodology, including a sociolinguistic background, a map task, and a word list (see Appendix). The goal is to generate Moroccan place-name data from Moroccan residents in Morocco who spoke Darija (Moroccan Arabic). The interviewees were informed prior to the start of the recording that

it would be used for research purposes. The sociolinguistic part determines each speaker's language and dialect profile. It was delivered in the speaker's native tongue. It reveals the areas where they lived, the accent spoken with family and friends, and all of the languages and dialects they spoke and understood. In addition, the usage of the map aims to gather subjects' colloquial and casual pronunciations of Moroccan place names. A colored map of Morocco, using both official Arabic and French toponym variants, was placed before the subjects where they were asked to describe in dialect how to get to and from various points. The final phase of the interview entailed reading a word list in dialect containing toponyms such as provinces, cities, towns, administrative divisions, regions, and mountain ranges. The extracts utilized in this study are drawn from various regions to generate reliable generalizations, indicating the possible variations. They depict male, female, young, elderly, literate, uneducated, Moroccan speaking groups conversing at a slow and fast pace. Sixty interviews were conducted.

In order for bias not to affect the phonetic transcription of the recorded variants, it was first made manually by me and was later double-checked by two other linguists. Moreover, Square brackets (...) are used for allophones or sequences when no particular phonemic claims are being made; slashes (...) are used for phonemes. Furthermore, 'spoken toponymy' and 'dialectal or vernacular toponymy' are used interchangeably in this study.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

In Morocco, we find place names in a bilingual context (Arabic and French representation), hence dialectal toponyms frequently have numerous variants. One of the fundamental reasons for this divergence is the impact of either French or Arabic. The phenomenon known as local pronunciation is an example of how place names are pronounced differently. In a multilingual society, the concept of local pronunciation is even more prominent; for example, French-influenced speakers of Rabat call it [ʁaba], whereas Arabic-influenced locals say [rəbat]. The dialectal differences regard mainly the use of either /ʁ/ (the uvular fricative/approximant) or /r/ for the R. The /ʁ/ or the "uvular R"

was mainly prominent in the individuals influenced by French. It is important to note that they used a /ʁ/ sound rather than a /ɣ/ sound. /ʁ/ is further back in the throat than /ɣ/ (the velar fricative, or the “gh” sound).

The spoken toponymy recorded variation phonetic variations. The plosive uvular /q/ is often palatalized to /g/ (allophones). /ǧ/ is realized predominantly as [ʒ]. The existence of labialization is more common in certain regions like in Marrakech: *mm̥warakech*. Pronunciation of L depends on the phonological context where alveolar lateral approximate /l/ for front vowels /ɫ/ for back vowels. Note that “l with tilde” [ɫ] is different from the “belted l” [ɫ̥], which is a voiceless alveolar lateral fricative.

Changes in tongue body position characterize emphatic allophones of vowels, which can be roughly described as [ɑ] for /a/, [i] for /i/, and [o] for /u/. It is generally assumed that MA contains three phonemic vowels {i, a, u}. Long vowels have been shortened, and short vowels have been lost, resulting in consonant clusters that are eventually split by a short central vowel generated by the language. The vowel variation of northern and southern dialects differ somewhat, where the north generally employs a more rounded long ‘a’ compared to the south. Some regions in the southern part of Morocco tend to reduce the vowels into a mid-central vowel sound schwa /ə/.

In Morocco, a shift toward the lexical distribution of rhotic emphasis has occurred from reducing the vowel system and a trend toward paradigm regularization. In addition, the rhotic pharyngealization among some Moroccan speakers in the city of Fès has also influenced the dialectal variants they use, especially the usage of the voiced retroflex approximant /ɻ/ instead of the voiced alveolar trill /r/.

In Moroccan Arabic, it is well known that standard stress is placed on the last syllable, provided that syllable is a ‘heavy’ word syllable (CVC). However, the penultimate syllable is stressed if a word does not end in a CVC syllable. From the data, an interesting variation was noticed within the stress placement. For instance, residents of Tetouan tended to stress the first syllable more than residents of Rabat and Kenitra.

Tables 1 and 2 show an extract of the data collected.

**Table 1. Vernacular variants of city names**

Official French toponym	Official Arabic toponym	Spoken toponym	Phenomena
Casablanca	Ad-dār al-Bayḍā (الدار البيضاء)	/darbidˤa/ /kaza/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ɖ → d</li> <li>• Dropping of the definite article Ad, and al</li> <li>• The diphthongs */aw/ and */ay/ are mostly reduced to /ū/ and /ī/ (Bayḍā → Bi:da)</li> </ul>
Marrakech	Murrākūš (مراكش)	/mrakəʃ/ /keʃ/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vowel shortening in the first CVC</li> <li>• Clipping word</li> </ul>
Ras El Ma	Ra's Al Ma' (رأس الماء)	/ras_lma/ /ras_kəbdana/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compensatory lengthening: /raʔs/ – /ra:s/.</li> <li>• Dropping of the definite article al</li> <li>• Old naming</li> </ul>
Asilah	Asilah (أصيلة)	/zajla/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional variation</li> </ul>
Tetouan	Tiṭwān (تطوان)	/titˤawən/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional variation</li> <li>• Addition of secondary stress</li> </ul>
Chefchaouen	Shafshaūn (شفشاون)	/ʃawən/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clipping word</li> </ul>
M'diq	Al Maḍyaq (المضيق)	/ˤrinkon/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colonial toponym</li> </ul>
Fnideq	Al fnidaq (الفتنيق)	/kastiju:/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colonial toponym (Castillejos)</li> </ul>
Rissani	'Ariṣani (الريصاني)	/sidʒilma,sa/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A medieval Moroccan city near Rissani</li> </ul>
Guelmim	Gualmim (كلميم)	/babˤsəhra/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regional surname</li> </ul>
Larache	Al 'ara'ish (العرانش)	/liksəs/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Old naming (lixus)</li> </ul>
Zagora	Zagoura (زاكورة)	/tazaɡurt/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Berber influenced</li> </ul>
Essaouira	Aṣ-Ṣawīra (الصويرة)	/ˤswira/ /mogador/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blend word</li> <li>• Portuguese name</li> </ul>
El Jadida	Al-Jadīda, (الجديدة)	/lbrejʒa/ /mazagan/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diminutive form of the word "Borg"</li> <li>• French version of the Portuguese Mazagão</li> </ul>
Mohammedia	Al-Muḥammadiyya (المحمدية)	/fɖala/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Old naming</li> </ul>
Mehdia	Al-Mahdiyyā (المهدية)	/məʃmura/	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accustomed previous name</li> </ul>

Source: own work.



Some dialect names of places differ significantly from their official equivalents and thus become critical in rendering a more comprehensive understanding of a toponym. They not only allow us to associate names with the physical places, facts, and events to which they are linked but also justify the toponyms in local people's minds. Language has the ability to attach new labels to places while conceivably erasing the accumulated historical layers of meaning from memory and identity. It is an indication of a linguistic frontier and a means of locating certain older uses.

The chosen toponyms often adhere to territorial realities and are thus acceptable and commonly used, whereas other times they do not conform to perceived or observed realities and often end up being purely made up and ignored by most inhabitants. According to Boujrouf and Hassani, it is not uncommon for responsible authorities to choose toponyms while communities choose others (Boujrouf & Hassani, 2008); for example, the municipality of Marrakech has named a district in the city's northwestern *Hay Hassani* ('Hassani district'), while the population prefers to call it *Diour Massakine* ('Houses of the miserable'). The municipality of Sidi Bennour has named a district *Derb Mekka* ('District of Mecca'), while the local population refers to it as *Deb Jrane* ('District of the Frogs') a toponym that represents its current state. Hence, the toponym represents the perceived state of the land, and its misuse or misinterpretation can provoke cultural misunderstandings.

The names chosen often correspond to socio-spatial realities and sometimes do not; the high-standing spaces bear names of greenery and gardening such as *Quartier l'Oasis*, *Quartier Agdal*, and *Quartier des Orangers*. Others have flashy foreign names like *Californie* or *Bourgogne*, while others are poorly equipped and underprivileged, with names like *Quartier du Progrès* ('District of Progress') or *Quartier du Bonheur* ('District of Happiness'). The territorial toponym, thus, acts as a window to the existing or contradicting realities and can help shape the land representation.

Toponyms disclose the content of the denomination's circumstances by displaying the connotations that name users may associate with the names. The names reveal details about the relationship between the name giver and the named entity. "A place name not only points out a place, but it also mediates a cluster of qualities and meanings attached to that place, partly valid for a single individual, partly shared by a given social group" (Helleland, 2012, p. 100).

**Table 2. Semantic vernacular variants of place names**

Official toponym	Spoken toponym
Oulad Mtaa	/məʃru:ʕ/ ('project')
Souk Lkalb ('Dog market')	Souk El Salheen
Dr Bennaceur sud Dr Bennaceur nord	Jamaica
Oued Eddahab ('Oued of gold')	Oued El Khanze ('Oued of bad smell')
Sidi Allal El Bahraoui	Lkamouni
Yacoub El Mansour	Douar Debagh ('Tanning (leather)')
Hay Hassani ('District of Hassani')	Diour Massakine ('Houses of the miserable')
Derb Mekka ('District of Mecca')	Derb Jrane ('District of the frogs')
Kasbahs, Ouarzazate	/iyerman/

Source: own work.

## 5. Conclusion

Place names are the names given to specific geographical locations that indicate a subjective perception of the living environment by the local residents at the time of naming. Given that a place name is a linguistic sign with the ability to denote a designation, the significance of this type of sign is frequently found in its dialect form, which expresses a distinct world of reference within a given cultural system. This paper aimed to show the impact of 'spoken' toponymy. The findings reveal an onomastic variation influenced by dialectal variances in the lexicon.

By exhibiting the implications that name users may attach with the names, toponyms reveal the substance of the denomination's circumstances. The spoken toponym often mirrors the perceived state of the land. Dialectal names can be used to identify linguistic boundaries as well as to locate specific ancient applications. Moreover, the spoken toponymy may not only reveal additional toponymic divisions in space, but it may also allow the toponyms to speak, indicating its use in etymological and motivational reconstruction processes.

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## Appendix

This interview was delivered in the speaker's native tongue – all translations by the author unless otherwise specified.

### Consent:

- Do you consent to be audiotaped during this study?
- Do you consent for your recording to be used for research purposes?

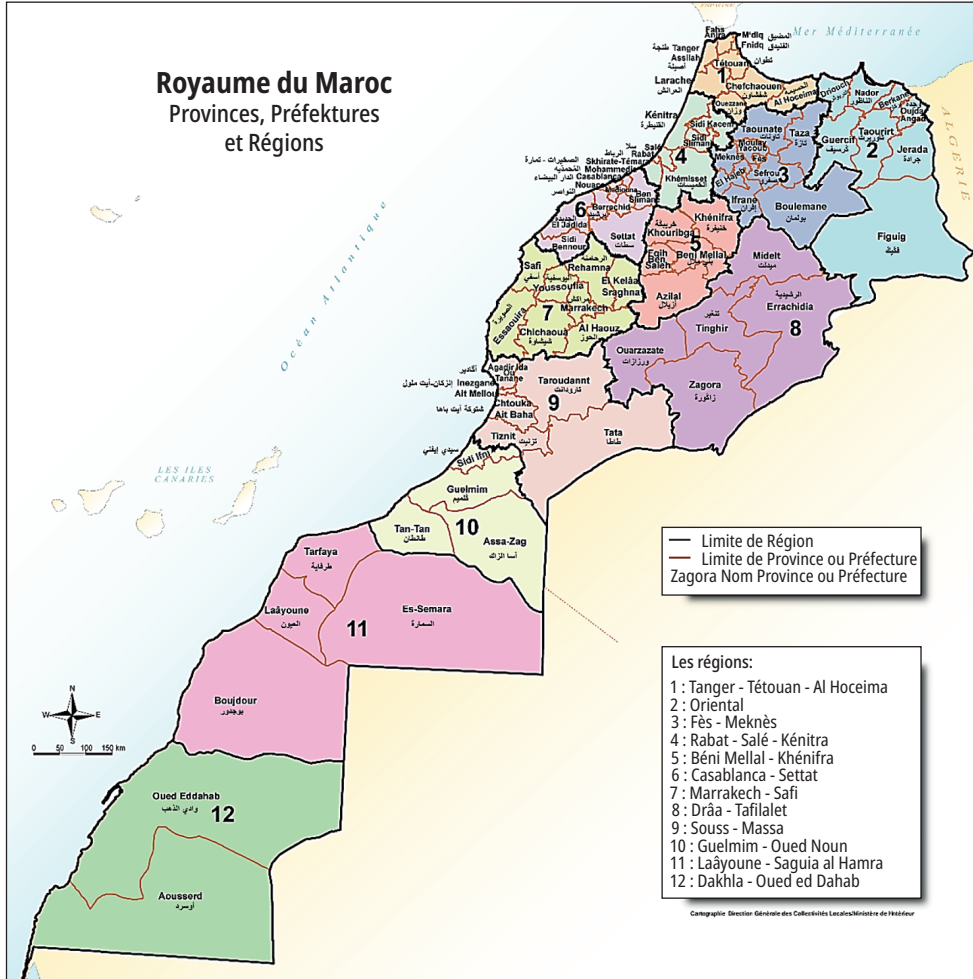
### Sociolinguistic background:

- What is your age?
- What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?
- What is your current employment status?
- Where were you born?
- Where are your parents from?
- Where are you located now?
- Where have you lived before?
- What is your primary language?
- What language do you consider to be your mother tongue? Why?
- Did you grow up speaking a language other than Darija in your home?  
\_\_\_\_\_ If so, what language?
- How many languages do you know?
- Which languages are you capable of speaking fluently?
- In what languages or dialects do you feel comfortable discussing routine information and expressing your opinions?
- How do you feel when you change between Arabic and French?
- What do you notice when you change between languages in terms of cultural expectations?
- Do you think that there are situations where a specific language should be used?
- Are there any areas or neighborhoods in your hometown you would not want to visit?

These questions enabled a more conversational interview, which aided in identifying the speaker's accent and dialect.

**Map task:**

- How to get from [location A] to [location B]?



Source: <https://www.collectivites-territoriales.gov.ma/fr/la-region>

**Word list:**

“For the last part of our interview, I have a list of place names for you to read out loud. There is no right or wrong way to say any of the words; just read each place name however you would usually call it. You can begin whenever you are ready.”

Rabat	Salé	Témara	Kénitra
Khémisset	Casablanca	Mohammedia	El Jadida
Berrechid	Meknès	Séfrou	Marrakech
Essaouira	Safi	Tanger	Asilah
M'diq	Fnideq	Larache	Al Hoceïma
Chefchaouen	Ouezzane	Oujda	Béni Mellal
Khénifra	Khouribga	Errachidia	Ouarzazate
Ras El Ma	Tetouan	Rissani	Zagora
Essaouira	Mehdia	Taounate	El Hajeb
Guelmim	Sifi Ifni	Laâyoune	Erfoud
Taurirt	Saïdia	El Jebha	Dakhla
Rissani	Errachidia	Merzouga	Midelt
Azrou	Boujdour	Aousserd	Youssoufia
Oued Ed Dahab	Guercif	Fés	Berkane
l'Oriental	Drâa-Tafilalet	Souss Massa	Sakia El Hamra
Haut-Atlas	Toubkal	M'Goun	Ourika
Ait Oucheg	Oukaimeden	Draa	Dadès
Moyen-Atlas	Bin El Ouidane	Rif	Akchour
Anti-Atlas	Taroudant	Taliouine	Tafraoute
Sebou	Moulouya	Seguia el-Hamra	Bouregreg