

Social representations and foreign language learning

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Abstract:

Social representations (SR) are one the most influencing social-psychological factors involved in foreign language (FL) learning (Maurer, 2013). In particular, it has been proved that speakers' representations of languages and their cultures influence the processes and strategies they develop and implement for language learning and use (Castellotti & Moore, 2002). It is precisely because SR and images of languages, cultures and speakers play a central role in language learning processes, and because they are malleable, that they are relevant to linguists and learning specialists. These highly stereotyped images have the power either to sustain/inhibit or to interrupt learning itself. The intent of this study is to determine whether and which social representations influence Moroccan foreign language undergraduate students in their choices and motivations. By analysing the SR elicited through a survey questionnaire filled out by students from the departments of English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese and Italian, we will be able to determine which representations have a greater impact on undergraduate learners' attitudes and motivation. A deepen understanding of social-psychological aspects involved in foreign language learning is undoubtedly one of the major issues faced by linguists and educators.

Keywords: social representations; foreign language learning; Moroccan students; languages and cultures.

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التصورات الاجتماعية وتعلم اللغات الأجنبية

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الملخص:

تُعد التصورات الاجتماعية من أكثر العوامل الاجتماعية والنفسية تأثيرًا في تعلم اللغات الأجنبية. (Maurer, 2013) وقد ثبت، على وجه الخصوص، أن تصورات المتكلمين للغات وثقافتهم تؤثر على العمليات والاستراتيجيات التي يطورونها وينفذونها لتعلم اللغة واستخدامها (Castellotti & Moore, 2002, 2002). ولأن التصورات الاجتماعية والصور النمطية للغات والثقافات والمتحدثين تلعب دورًا محوريًا في عمليات تعلم اللغة، ولأنها قابلة للتطويع فهي ذات صلة باللغويين والمتخصصين في التعلم. تتمتع هذه الصور النمطية للغاية بالقدرة إما على استدامة/ تثبيط التعلم أو قطعه نهائيًا. والهدف من هذه الدراسة هو تحديد ما إذا كانت التصورات الاجتماعية تؤثر على طلاب البكالوريوس المغاربة في اللغة الأجنبية في اختياراتهم ودوافعهم وأنها تؤثر على ذلك. من خلال تحليل التصورات الاجتماعية المستخلصة من خلال استبيان استقصائي ملأه طلاب من أقسام اللغة الإنجليزية والفرنسية والإسبانية والألمانية والبرتغالية والإيطالية، سنتمكن من تحديد أي من التصورات لها تأثير أكبر على مواقف المتعلمين الجامعيين ودوافعهم. مما لا شك فيه أن تعميق فهم الجوانب الاجتماعية والنفسية التي ينطوي عليها تعلم اللغات الأجنبية هو أحد القضايا الرئيسية التي يواجهها اللغويون والمعلمون .

الكلمات المفتاحية: التصورات الاجتماعية؛ تعلم اللغات الأجنبية؛ الطلاب المغاربة؛ اللغات والثقافات.

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Introduction

The concept of social representations (SR) is considered by many researchers and scholars to be an important factor involved in foreign language learning (FLL). The term is used frequently in social-psychological studies, though close inspection in the literature on language learning will reveal some important aspects:

- Shortage of studies investigating representations of languages
- Focus on representations of second languages
- Misconception of SR of foreign languages: some researchers do investigate only language representations without taken into account that the term “social” includes the culture as well.

Our intention is primarily to help foster further understanding of SR of FLL. As we wanted to find out about students’ SR of foreign languages, we investigated not only their images and conceptions about the languages themselves, but also about cultures. By analysing the representations elicited through a survey questionnaire filled out by students from the departments of English, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese and Italian, we could analyse and determine whether and which social representations influence Moroccan foreign language undergraduate students’ choices and motivations. Our hypothesis is that there is a strong correlation between SR and attitudes towards language learning: only positive representations can generate favourable attitudes and boost the learning of a foreign language. In order to verify our hypothesis, the following research question will be answered:

- Which languages are most useful to learn? And why?
- Which languages are less useful to learn? And why?
- Which other languages would they like to learn? And why?
- Why did students choose to major in these languages?
- What do they think about the target culture?
- What are their plans for the future? Are these plans professionally and personally connected to the chosen languages?

We begin by sketching a theoretical framework that identifies salient issues about the concept of SR; further, literature is surveyed on images and representations of languages spoken and taught in Morocco. This is followed by a brief description of the contextual background, participants and procedure we applied in our research. Finally, schematic descriptions of the findings are presented and discussed, relating the study of SR to language choice and motivations.

1. Social representations

During the last 50 years social representations has become an important field within social-psychology and has been extensively studied by a large number of students and scholars from around the world. Starting with Durkheim's collective and individual representations (Bonardi, C. & Roussiau, N., 1999), the concept of social representations was developed by Serge Moscovici in 1961 in his well-known study on the various understandings of psychoanalysis in different social groups in France (Moscovici, S., 1961). According to him, a social representation is «a system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history» (Moscovici, S., 1973, p. xiii).

SR are at the core of our interactions in daily life. We make extensive use of them to learn the world and, as Durkheim repeatedly underlines, "social life is entirely made up of representations" (quoted in Rouquette & Rateau, 1998, p.14). Not only do they play an important role in organizing contents, descriptions and interpretations of otherwise incomprehensible facts in a familiar way (Margiotta, 2008), but they are a key that helps us to understand all kinds of social psychological phenomena, and this is why they concern the totality of the social sciences. The contact between cultures shows how these phenomena are variable: what is evident for one people is not necessarily for another, because our interpretations of the world do not always cross all borders. "Each one is part of the world he observes and by observing changes his world, his identity, SR of the self and of the other" (Minello, 2008, p. 57).

Despite the concept of SR has been defined as a “*notion carrefour*” for its multidisciplinary approach that has attracted anthropologists, linguists, sociologists, social psychologists and educational experts (Bonardi, C. & Roussiau, N., *Op. Cit.*), it is still a little-used notion in the linguistic field, mainly found at a theoretical level in some doctoral theses in educational sciences, rarely at a practical level: researchers do not devote enough attention to SR in their studies about languages. Introducing the concept of SR into linguistic fields, regardless of the status of the target language, emphasizes the positive aspect of heterogeneity that undoubtedly leads to rethinking our stereotypes and prejudices, and updating our mental schemes.

The meeting point between SR and language learning lies in the crucial role played by learners’ conceptions and images of the target language and culture. Maurer (2013, p.25) provides an interesting definition of these images: “the beauty of the language, that of the country where it is spoken, its usefulness for travel, the presence of speakers in the country, the link with family roots: so many images of the language that make up a value system determining the desire for learning. It’s about this set of images that we’ll talk about social representations”. However, these stereotyped images can positively or negatively influence language learning and come from both the *social milieu*, as vernacular beliefs (Py, 2004) spread through various social and media channels (TV, tourist brochures, literary texts, etc...) (Castellotti, 2001), and also from the educational context as an acquired linguistic knowledge (Py, *Op. Cit.*). The language representations are as varied and diverse as the subjects involved in the educational system, each of them bears some conceptions and beliefs (Cavalli *et al.*, 2001): even the teacher shows, sometimes involuntarily, his/her own SR in the classroom through his/her behaviour and attitudes (Castellotti, *Op. Cit.*).

One of the main dilemmas faced by social-psychologists and linguists is whether SR are produced or built. Moussouri (2010a) firmly believes that representations are produced when they emerge subconsciously in speakers' language productions, *vice versa* they are built when consciously used: therefore in the first case he defines them as "epilinguistic representations", since they are produced in autobiographical discourses and concern learner's linguistic facts; in the second case, they can be analysed as "metalinguistic representations", which are explicitly and consciously formulated even in target language speeches, whether formal or informal.

According to Moussouri (*Op. Cit.*) language learning would be profoundly marked by some social actors who can alter learners' representations; he means "the family, the school, the social circle of the learner as well as that of his parents, the country where the target language is learnt and his native country" (p. 510). Many studies confirm that the target culture representations may influence the language learning process. This is exactly what is claimed in studies investigating French and Swiss students' representations about Germany and the German language: it is considered a language very difficult to learn and therefore it has an unsatisfactory grammar, compared to the French grammar, which is equilibrated and this would reflect the common sense of the French people (Castellotti, *Op. Cit.*; Py, *Op. Cit.*). This example confirms that SR of languages do exist also in the educational context, shared by students and teachers, who often support these conceptions (Py, *Op. Cit.*).

SR are an intrinsic component of language learning which must be taken into account in all language policies and educational planning (Castellotti & Moore, *Op. Cit.*).

2. Representations of foreign languages in Morocco

Language representations play a fundamental role in the language learning process: they are important as they reveal the affection or disaffection felt by students when learning a language, their motivation degree (Boukous, 1998) and orientation. Yet there has been very little research that explores language representations in the Moroccan context. In fact, not only the number of empirical research carried out so far is very small, but the results of some these investigations are no more reliable, given the years to which they date.

One of the most investigated aspects is students' perception of their competence (see Boukous, 1995; Benitez *et al.* 2013). However, these studies focus mainly on Arabic Standard, French, English, Moroccan Arabic and Amazighe, leaving aside the other foreign languages taught in the Moroccan educational system.

The French language represents the West which is seen as the detentor of technology and science. Very few speakers associate FR to the desire of acquiring a better knowledge of France or even belonging to it: it is mostly an instrumental orientation and not an integrative one, since the need to learn FR is not related to a genuine interest towards the French culture or to support the so-called "*francophonie*", but to only acquire a means to appropriate of the latest technical-scientific inventions (Boukous, 2005).

As for the English language, the most common representations see it as "more developed", "more technical" and "more useful" than FR for the future of Morocco. It is seen as the language that offers job opportunities and opens the doors of an academic world completely different from the French one, strongly marked by scientific research (Boukous, 1995).

The number of empirical research carried out to detect Moroccan students' motivation towards foreign language learning is very limited. In a survey conducted by Guebels (1990) on motivations of Rabat's high school students towards English, their answers show a reluctant attitude when asked about the reason why they should learn English, despite being enrolled in a science-based classes where the learning of English is compulsory. They give more importance to the written language, as English is mainly used for reading literature books and scientific studies and for written correspondence; oral use of the language does not seem to be the primary objective of these students.

Yet, even the motivation of students towards languages seems to have changed in the last decade, as El Kirat and Bennis affirm (2010, p. 29):

«La recherche de terrain nous a révélé que la société marocaine [...] est très pragmatique. Les langues sont comme des habits ; nous le portons tant qu'elles sont utiles. La première réplique que nous avons relevée lors de notre enquête sur terrain est : « que va nous apporter la langue amazighe? Va-t-elle nous garantir un emploi? Va-t-elle assurer notre avenir? ».

As far as we know, there are no certified studies on representations and attitudes towards the other languages taught in Moroccan schools, like Spanish, Italian and German, despite the strong importance given by students of public schools to the study of foreign languages (Boukous, 2001). Future researches should broaden the study of language representations and attitudes to all of the foreign languages taught in all types of educational institutions now offered in Morocco (public, private and foreign).

3. Method

Social representations have been elicited through a survey questionnaire filled out by 302 students in their first year of enrolment at the departments of English, French, Spanish, German, Italian and Portuguese. In all cases they were full-time students who attended day courses.

To conduct the survey, a questionnaire was specifically designed to capture some of the main images and conceptions students had, not only about the language they major in but also about the other foreign languages included in our study. The questionnaire had 17 questions organised along three thematic blocks. The first one looks into the biodata and foreign language knowledge. The second tries to elicit students' representations on the above-mentioned languages. Questions from the third block cover several aspects related to motivation and future plans. The questionnaire combined open-ended questions and multiple-choice questions with predefined answers offering respondents the possibility to choose and rank among several options or the possibility to grade on a "very low" to "very high" scale. For these questions, an optional space was provided to elaborate on the answer. This open part is considered of great importance for a survey of this kind as it contributes to improving the interpretation of its overall

results and provides with additional valuable material. The analysis has been done through SPSS (statistical software), focusing on the frequency counts and descriptive statistics.

Three predicted variables have been analysed: gender, foreign languages skills and secondary school curriculum.

As regarding gender, it was not surprising that the majority of participants were female since, as we have seen in previous studies, language majors are predominantly female in Rabat (Eddahani, 2015), and it seems to be the same in many other parts of the world, as attested in a study carried out by Brown *et al.* (2002) in Brazil and by Gardner (1985) in Canada.

Depts. → Gender ↓	French (n=72)	English (n=75)	German (n=45)	Spanish (n=56)	Italian (n=32)	Portuguese (n=22)
M	12%	43%	61%	45%	42%	46%
F	88%	56%	38%	54%	57%	53%

The table shows a higher percentage of female participants in most of the departments. The only exception is the German department where the male gender prevails.

Another important variable that we included in this study is participants' foreign languages skills. Because of the diglossic situation we have in Morocco and the presence of several foreign languages, we believe it is important to investigate students' linguistic background, since this aspect may affect their attitudes towards the learning of other languages.

Depts.	French	English	German	Spanish	Italian	Portuguese
Languages	3 (AR-FR-EN)	3 (AR-FR-EN)	4 (AR-FR-EN-GER)	3 (AR-FR-SP)	3 (AR-FR-IT)	4 (AR-FR-EN-POR)

Most of the students declare that they know Arabic, French and English as they are the three languages that are taught in the Moroccan school system. The only ones who claim to know 4 languages are the students of German since although being available in high schools it is

generally not their first choice and therefore many of them switch to German after having studied English for a year or two. Students of Portuguese do not have the possibility to opt for this language when in high school as it is not present among the choices, therefore they have to opt for the other languages available, generally they choose English.

Starting from the fact that during the secondary studies the most chosen curriculum are the literary and the scientific ones and the general assumption that the literary course is the one that provides a better preparation for students wishing to graduate in languages, this third variable is fundamental to understand whether the student was really motivated to study languages from the very beginning of its secondary studies or he just came to it because he could not achieve a mark sufficient to allow him to be admitted to scientific faculties. When investigating participants' secondary school curriculum, we found rather heterogeneous data.

Curriculum	French	English	German	Spanish	Italian	Portuguese
Literature and Human Sciences	37%	49%	55%	81%	73%	76%
Experimental Sciences and Mathematical Sciences	62%	50%	44%	18%	15%	23%

The table shows that the majority of students majoring in Italian and Spanish come from the literary curriculum and this is not unexpected since the choice to study these languages is generally offered to literary students. However, we found that in the two most crowded departments, namely French and English, most of the students come from a secondary school scientific curriculum, despite the fact that generally linguistic studies are better matched to the literary-human sciences curriculum. This aspect leaves open to interpretation: it might have to do with the importance given to the scientific curriculum in our educational system/beliefs, and this is why it is chosen by students who are not really oriented towards science, or, many students probably come to study foreign languages because they have no other choices, some of whom have not been able to enter the "limited-access high institutions" and others do not possess a good

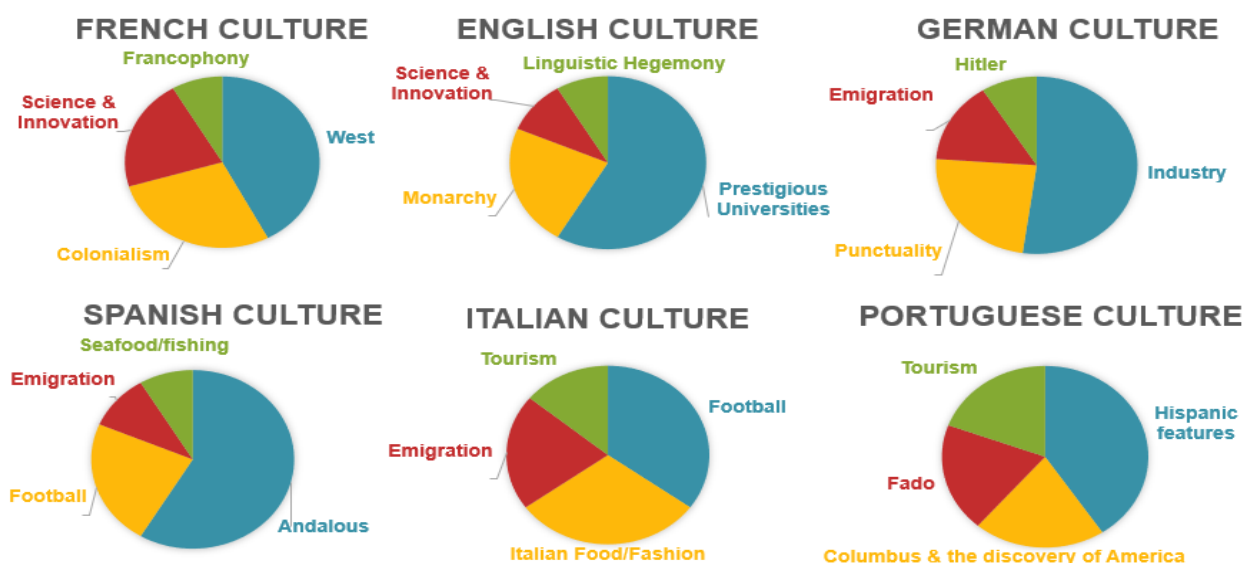
proficiency in French that would allow them to continue their studies at the faculty of science. Having now clear the profile of the participants we can proceed to the presentation of the results

4. Results and Discussion

The intent of this study is to identify which social representations portray French, English, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian languages and cultures in Moroccan undergraduate students' collective imagination, in order to highlight the impact that these representations can have on attitudes and motivation, as well as on the learning and mastery of these languages.

The collected data highlighted different results. As regards the most useful languages, students from all departments agree on the usefulness of English first and then French, with the sole exception of Spanish students who consider the Spanish language more useful than the French one. It should be noted that the Spanish language holds the third place for the majority of students and it is surely the importance of French in the Moroccan job market that allows it to rank second in front of one of the most spoken languages in the world. This is also confirmed by the various negative adjectives associated by students to the French language considered "difficult, old-fashioned, outdated and secondary", while Spanish is mainly defined as "fluid, melodic, exotic, romantic and easy". When it comes to the question about useless languages, the majority of students answers "none", except for students of English and Spanish that consider the learning of French as a waste of time: its status is really controversial. Spanish and German are the languages that almost all students would like to study in the future. Also, in this case there is an anomaly that affects German since it is considered "complicated, incomprehensible, strong" but still mentioned among the languages that they would like to study in order to receive scholarships and grants from the German government. As for Italian and Portuguese, they are considered "interesting and melodic" languages but useless in the Moroccan job market.

Turning our attention to the cultures, we asked students which words bring to their mind the cultures of the six foreign languages examined and here are their answers:



Some of the words mentioned by the students reflect positive images, as it the case of the English culture, mainly associated with the scientific research and the highly competitive universities. The German culture is more known for its rigorous attitude and perfectionism that makes its industry very attractive to our students who wish to emigrate to Germany. As for the Spanish, Italian and Portuguese cultures, we can notice the co-presence of the two motivational attitudes: the integrative and the instrumental one; students in this case appreciate food, fashion, football, but at the same time are interested in emigrating to get a “better life”. The only negative image elicited by the students is “colonialism” which is associated with the French culture: a further confirmation of the controversial status that French has in our country.

As regarding the question “Why did you choose to study the X language?” students gave practical reasons that show mainly an instrumental motivation.

FRENCH	ENGLISH	GERMAN	SPANISH	ITALIAN	PORTUGUESE
To have a high-level competence	Essential	Pursuing Studies in Germany	International language	Pursuing Studies in Italy	A new language
Morocco is a french-speaking country	Easy	Get the Schengen Visa	The only possible choice	The only possible choice	A Latin language

The choice of the language is professionally connected to their plans for the future. Students choose the language to study based on the job opportunities it offers in the Moroccan job market.

FRENCH	ENGLISH	GERMAN	SPANISH	ITALIAN	PORTUGUESE
<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Settling in Germany</u>	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Studying an MA in Italy</u>	<u>Translation</u>
<u>Translation/Journalism</u>	<u>Studying an MA</u>	<u>Teaching</u>	<u>Translation</u>	<u>Translation/Teaching</u>	<u>Studying an MA in Portugal</u>

Three main variables have been analysed in this study: gender, secondary school curriculum and foreign languages skills.

The gender variable shows that women are more oriented towards foreign languages. We detected a greater presence of women in all departments, except for the German department where the majority are male: linking this data to the answers provided in the two tables above we would say that this is probably due to the fact that many of them are willing to emigrate to Germany.

As for the secondary school curriculum, we would like to underline the fact that students with a "Baccalauréat" in the Italian or Spanish language, associated to the humanistic/literary curriculum, are not able to enter the "limited-access high institutions" which are all scientifically-oriented. These students, when asked to justify the choice to major in Spanish or Italian, say that they had no choice (see table above). The problem is that these two languages are sometimes imposed to students of the humanistic/literary curriculum during the high-school, and this creates an unfavourable attitude which affects negatively their motivation at university and dropout rate.

By analysing students' skills in foreign languages, we notice that only students of Portuguese have studied four languages, since Portuguese is not available at the secondary school and, therefore, they are forced to opt for other languages, mainly English. Students majoring in a

foreign language that has been studied since the secondary school are undoubtedly more motivated and can reach a better proficiency in it.

The results of this study show the importance of SR in generating positive or negative attitudes towards the learning of a language. Students of the French department consider English as the most useful language because it is the key to modernity and science and not French, which they are studying only because Morocco is a French-speaking country and therefore it would facilitate them the access to the job market. In fact, if they had the opportunity to go back, they would choose English. This unfavourable attitude towards French is shown even more in the answers given by students of the other departments, who often classify French among the least useful languages and the French Culture is still associated to colonialism. An example of positive SR that generate favourable attitudes towards the learning of a language is the case of Spanish that students would like to study in the future mainly because it is “melodic and easy” and its culture elicits positive images. These two examples also show the close relationship between language representations and culture representations, and the crucial role they might have in the language learning process.

Yet, controversial data emerge from the results we exposed so far which show how our starting hypothesis cannot always be confirmed. In the case of the German language, we found negative representations but a strong desire of students to learn this language in the future, driven by a very instrumental motivation; vice versa in the case of Italian and Portuguese representations are very positive but they are not sufficient to justify their learning, discouraged by the low demand for these languages in the job market. This leads us to different conclusions.

4. Conclusion

Social representations have a very strong impact on the linguistic choices of students. They can generate favourable and unfavourable attitudes towards the language learning process. However, they are not the only criteria used by students to select which language to study. It is the immediate usability in the national and international job market that motivates the most. Since we cannot change this aspect, we can at least help students to model and re-model their SR. These representations cannot be eradicated but, since they are malleable conceptions, we can teach our students to distance themselves from the values of the community they belong to and try to find out other systems of values that are potentially different, even contradictory, to theirs, in order to acquire a critical ability with regard to their surroundings.

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