Diaspora and Cultural Identity: Italian-Moroccans as a Case Study

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Abstract

A key element in the development of cultural identity is language. In their study on the ethnic identities of Korean American students, Jung and Lee (2004) discovered that the majority of their research participants identify as having a strong Korean ancestry despite speaking fluent English and being American citizens. Instead of calling themselves Americans, they identify as either Korean Americans or Koreans. Yet, there are cases when diasporas who master the language of the host country identify themselves as citizens of that country. In Italy, Moroccans are the first largest group of non-Western immigrants. From the 1970s, the number arriving to Italy under family reunification schemes and work became more significant. Accordingly, this study investigates the way that the Moroccan diaspora living and studying within Italian communities identify themselves. Interviews and questionnaires were used to gather data. The results yielded that the participants preserve their Moroccan identity though they were born and raised in Italy.

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than 40 years, immigrants from Morocco have been a part of Italian culture. Moroccan immigrants to Italy in the 1960s and 1970s were successful in bringing their families together through the family reunification process. Their children were either born in Italy or immigrated there when they were very small. They attend Italian schools and are assimilated into the community. The Italian National Institute of Statistics reports that, as of 2018, immigrants make up 8.9% of Italy's overall population, with 69.8% of them hailing from nations outside the European Union. Moroccan immigrants make up the largest and oldest non-European immigrant group in Italy as of 2018, and 70.3% of them have a visa for long-term residency. Long-term presence indicates that a second generation grew up and attended school in Italy. Additionally, according to statistics on the population of Moroccan immigrants in Italy, of the 428,947 Moroccans who are officially residing there (ISTAT,2021), 27.4% are children, and 40.6% are young adults, as reported by the Ministry of Work and Social Welfare in its 2018 report. This means that both today and in the future, a sizable portion of Italy's young population will be of Moroccan descent.

The origins of Moroccans in Italy can be traced to numerous Moroccan provinces. This has resulted in a diverse Italian-Moroccan population made up of Moroccan Arabs and non-Arabs. Parents in endogamous households, like the ones of the study's participants, typically speak

Moroccan dialects of Arabic and may also be familiar with Standard Arabic. If they are educated, they might also know a little bit of French and speak Berber (Mori, 2007; Amoruso, 2008). According to specific family language policy, members of the second generation may have learnt Arabic from their parents. They may also have some knowledge of the Italo-Romance dialects, which Italian children frequently use in conversations with their peers. Additionally, they might have picked up a language or two at school (Goglia, 2018).

   Several studies were conducted on the Moroccan-Italian population. For example, Cicognani et al. (2018) investigated how social identities are constructed among young Moroccan living in Italy. Twenty-nine Moroccan youth (16-23 years old), consisting of fifteen females and fourteen boys, participated in the study. According to data analyses, participants must negotiate a variety of identity categories in the host country, including those that are frequently used to categorize them as others, such as Muslim, Moroccan, and immigrant. They negotiate feelings of exclusion and bias using various techniques. The authors found that emphasizing acculturation as the construction of meaning within a larger social ecology and relations of power reveals the intricacy of power dynamics and resistance and adds to a more "empowering" image of young migrants and their abilities. The study demonstrates that young people are proactive, adaptable, and creative in resolving the conflicts they encounter as they build lives as migrants in challenging environments and in devising their tactics to oppose and assert their belonging. These processes are significant because they relate to gender, life stage, and other social variables, demonstrating the importance of considering social positions within communities in order to comprehend the ongoing process of identity development and negotiation.

 A study by Marco Rizzo et al. (2019) examined how young adult Muslims of the second generation negotiate their identities in light of the demands from the community they consider to be the most significant. They examined the various connections between the participants' ethnic, religious, and national identities and their most significant community, starting with the one the participants believed was most important to them. Twenty Moroccan teenagers and young adults who have lived in Italy since they were 6 years old took part in-person, semi-structured interviews. The interviewees' replies revealed how difficult it is for them to balance their religious and ethnic identities and how this process relates to how they understand religion and how they practice it in their daily lives. Their research highlights the complex character of community as a social and sociocultural setting where interdependence between people and their environments takes place (Trickett, 2009). According to this viewpoint, their findings contradict the widely known notion that there is an"irreducible difference" between Islam and the West as well as the "impossible integration" of Muslim immigrants (Perocco, 2008). The interviews revealed a range of linkages between identity and community belonging, but the interviewees' desire to successfully integrate themselves was the one constant. Integration depends on an awareness of one's place in the society in which one lives and marks the successful completion of the migration projects and efforts of one's parents (Zimmerman, 2015). The active role that these young people of the second generation play in their community has significant implications for policies that reduce tensions in the sociopolitical environment, particularly among young Muslims, which could ultimately help them integrate into a pluralistic society.

Generally speaking, a large number of scholars have investigated the issue of socio-cultural integration and identity of diasporic communities through the contacts that diasporas have made with the host society, their sense of belonging to this society and their attitudes towards it, in addition to their knowledge of and proficiency in the host society's language.

Deeming proficiency in the language of the host country as a significant factor in the socio-cultural integration of migrants and their identity, this study explores identity among Moroccans who live in Italy with a focus on language mastery as a major factor in the formation of identity. It attempts to test the hypothesis that language is fundamental to cultural identity and that mastering the language of the "other" is likely to influence one's identity. Specifically, the study aims to find an answer to the following research question: "How do young Italian Moroccans who have full mastery of the Italian language define and negotiate their identity, and what are the key factors affecting the development of this identity?"

2. LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Language and cultural identity

Language generally plays two major roles: an instrumental role and a symbolic role (e.g. Edwards, 1984). In its instrumental role, language serves as a means of communication whereby people understand and make themselves understood by others. The symbolic role, on the other hand, means that language has "representational" meanings, especially as an emblem of one's culture and identity as Edwards (2009 in Owen, 2011) says: "in its symbolic role, language acts "as an emblem of groupness, a symbol, a psychosocial rallying point"(p. 43). This means that language represents cultural or ethnic characteristics in addition to other groupings (religious, regional, social class, etc.) within the same language with differences in accent, pronunciation, or vocabulary.

The relationship between language and cultural identity has been theorized through three primary lenses, each refined by recent scholarship. Essentialist perspectives, initially articulated by scholars like Fishman (1991), argued that language fundamentally encodes cultural worldviews, a claim supported by contemporary research on Indigenous language revitalization (Leonard, 2020) and psycholinguistic studies linking heritage language proficiency to culturally specific cognition (Athanasopoulos et al., 2019). However, modern proponents avoid deterministic claims, instead emphasizing bidirectional relationships where language both reflects and shapes identity (Meek, 2021). Contingent perspectives, which position language as merely one of many identity markers (Eastman, 1984), have been complicated by recent work demonstrating how language shift weakens intergenerational cultural transmission even when other identity elements persist (Mufwene, 2018; Costa, 2016). These competing views are bridged by contemporary negotiation frameworks that frame identity as fluid and context-dependent, particularly in transnational and digital spaces (Darvin & Norton, 2018; Lee, 2020).

Current research transcends traditional binaries by examining language as a site of political and social negotiation. Translingual practices (García & Tupas, 2022) and identity investment theory (Norton, 2015) reveal how speakers strategically mobilize linguistic resources to assert hybrid belongings, particularly in marginalized communities where language serves as both a tool of resistance and a target of erasure (Alim et al., 2020; Pérez Báez et al., 2022). This body of work underscores that while language may not rigidly determine identity, its loss or maintenance has measurable consequences for cultural continuity, epistemic sovereignty, and social power. The resulting synthesis positions language as a dynamic mediator of identity, one

that is neither reducible to a passive reflection of culture nor dismissible as a superficial trait but rather as a contested resource in ongoing struggles for recognition and belonging.

2.2. Diaspora and cultural identity

The concept of diaspora, originally denoting forced dispersal and enduring ties to a homeland (Safran, 1991), has evolved to encompass dynamic identity negotiations in transnational contexts. Early frameworks emphasized dislocation and longing (Clifford, 1994), but recent scholarship critiques this as overly static, highlighting hybridity (Bhabha, 2015) and multidirectional belonging (Brubaker, 2017) instead. For instance, Vertovec's (2019) notion of "diasporic space" rejects binary homeland/host-country divisions, showing how migrants negotiate layered affiliations through digital networks (Nedelcu & Soysüren, 2022) and cultural practices (Çağlar & Glick Schiller, 2018).

Contemporary research underscores diaspora identity as both contested and agentive. While historical trauma and exclusion persist (Tölölyan, 2019), studies reveal how second-generation migrants *curate* selective cultural elements (e.g., language, rituals) to assert belonging (Jones, 2021). This aligns with "strategic essentialism" (Spivak, 2015), where communities temporarily mobilize singular identities for political recognition, while everyday practices reflect fluidity (Dhoest, 2020). Critically, diaspora is no longer framed as loss but as *resource*. That is to say, transnational ties enable economic, cultural, and political capital challenging assimilationist paradigms (Laguerre, 2016).

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Sample population

The sample consists of young people from varied social and educational levels who are Italian-Moroccans and who live in different parts of Italy. Except for one, everyone interviewee is between the ages of twenty and thirty. Some of the interview subjects arrived in Italy as children and were Moroccan natives. The majority of the interview subjects were born and reared in Italy. Depending on where their parents are from, the respondents can either speak some Moroccan-Arabic or one of the several Berber languages. Of the thirty-nine, twenty-eight could understand and speak Moroccan-Arabic. However, there were some differences between those who actively understand it and those who passively grasp it but do not actively speak it. Eleven out of the thirty-nine interviewees were bilingual in Berber and Arabic. Few of them speak both a Berber language and Moroccan-Arabic fluently. The interviews were all conducted in English, and every interviewee is Italian. Twenty of the interviewees have professional institute (Instituto professionale) educations. Twelve of them are pursuing their bachelor's degrees (Laurea; Diploma Accademico di Primo Livello) or have already completed them. Seven of them are pursuing or have already received their master's degree (Laurea magistrale; diploma accademico di secondo livello). The table below (table 1) provides more information about the study's population.

Targeted Population	Gender	Number of Informants	Age Category
Moroccan Diaspora in Italy		Questionnaires	
	Males	10	20-25 years old
		07	25-30 years old
		02	30+ years old

		07	20-25 years old
	Females	06	25-30 years old
		00	30+ years old
	Interviews		
		02	20-25 years old
	Males	00	25-30 years old
		01	30+ years old
		02	20-25 years old
	Females	01	25-30 years old
		01	30+ years old

(table 1)

3.2. The sampling technique

Convenience sampling (also known as availability sampling), a kind of purposive sampling technique, is the sampling strategy I employed. It depends on population members who are readily available to participate in the study for the collection of data in order to be effective, meaning it is carried out on the basis of how easy is it for a researcher to get in touch with the subjects.

3.3. Data collection procedures

The study employed the mixed method that is, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used. This is to cross-check the findings and hence ensures their credibility.

Two data collection instruments are used. The first is the questionnaire which is used to elicit quantitative data. The questionnaires were e-mailed to the thirty-two participants. Since questionnaires are limited in terms of eliciting in-depth answers, interviews (with seven participants) are also used to get direct answers and explanations from the respondents.

4. ANALYSIS
4.1. Attitudes towards the language

The respondents demonstrate a clear hierarchy in their language attitudes, ranking English as the most important, followed by Arabic, then Italian. This preference reflects both pragmatic global considerations and deep-rooted cultural identities. As Interviewee 3 states: *"You know, Italian is only spoken here, whereas English is a universal language, allowing me to speak with anybody, anywhere."* This perspective aligns with contemporary research on linguistic entrepreneurship (De Costa et al., 2021), which shows migrants strategically investing in languages that offer the greatest social and economic mobility. The emphasis on English's universal utility reveals how respondents conceptualize language as cultural capital in a globalized world.

The career advantages of English are particularly salient, as expressed by Interviewee 5: *"Learning English will help me succeed not only in Italy but also in other countries since it has gained popularity throughout the world. I don't want to only apply for employment in Italy, after all. Additionally, Italians are eager to learn English."* This comment not only highlights the perceived economic value of English but also subtly critiques Italian's limited transnational utility, reflecting what Kanno (2021) terms "linguistic disinvestment" from the host country language when it offers fewer opportunities.

Arabic occupies a distinct middle position in respondents' language hierarchy, valued primarily for cultural and religious identity rather than pragmatic utility. As Interviewee 1 explains: *"Given that Arabic is my mother tongue and the language of my parents, it is undoubtedly more significant than*

Italian." Interviewee 3 expands on this: *"Yes, I believe Arabic is more significant than Italian. For instance, I may converse with my Italian friends here in English rather than always in Italian, but when I fly to Morocco, I must speak Arabic, and I pray in Arabic. Arabic is the language of my nation and my faith, thus."* These statements exemplify what Canagarajah (2018) describes as "compartmentalized multilingualism," where different languages serve distinct functional and symbolic purposes in migrants' lives.

The relatively lower valuation of Italian despite living in Italy suggests a complex negotiation between residence and belonging. While Italian serves practical daily needs, it lacks the deep cultural resonance of Arabic or the global utility of English. This creates what Heller (2021) identifies as a "linguistic capital hierarchy," where migrants strategically allocate their language learning efforts based on perceived returns. The respondents' attitudes reveal how language preferences reflect both identity preservation and pragmatic adaptation in transnational contexts. These hierarchical language attitudes are further illustrated in the following graph which visually represents participants' rankings of English, Arabic, and Italian in terms of perceived importance and functional use.
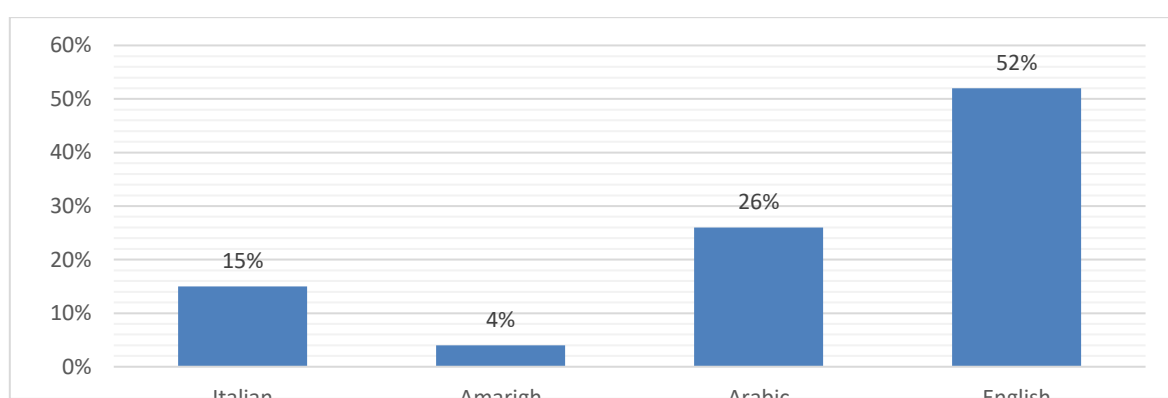

Graph 1. Language Attitudes

4.2. Religion

In terms of religion, all the respondents present themselves as Muslims. Yet, the degree to which they practice Islam is different. This is confirmed by Ghazza (2008), who found that while there are many Muslims abroad who actively practice Islam, for instance, visiting mosques regularly, praying five times a day, abstaining from alcohol, and wearing the veil, there are also many cultural Muslims who identify as Muslims. Similarly, Phalet and Ter Wal (2004) noted what they termed a trend of privatization of Islam among young Moroccans and Turks, indicating that despite a decline in participation in religious ceremonies and mosque attendance among Turks and Moroccans of second generation, their identification with Islam is still strong.

4.3. Life Style

This part aimed at finding out the respondents' way of life. The respondents were asked to choose between "Moroccan", "Italian", or "Hard to say" as their way of life. The graph below illustrates the findings.
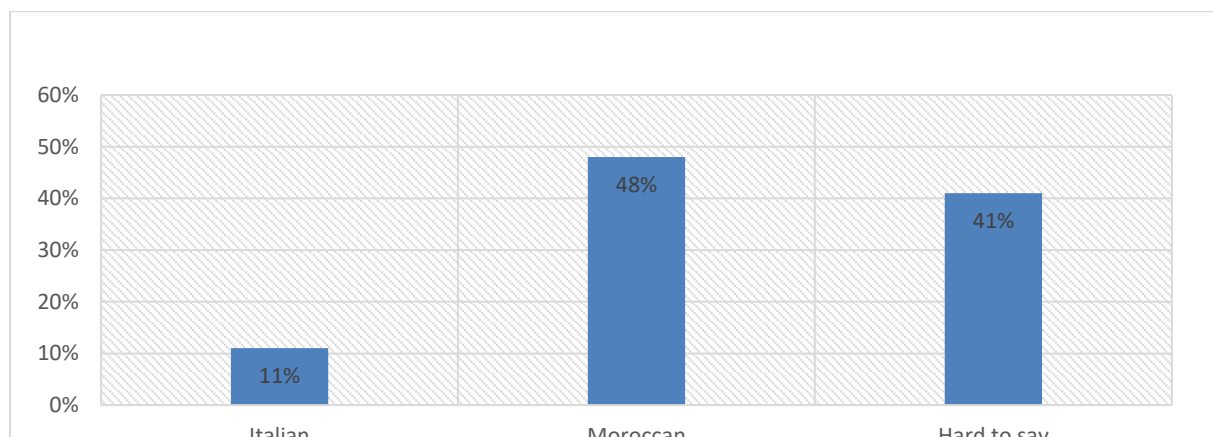
Graph 2. The Respondents' Life Style

A close analysis of the graph reveals that the majority chose the option "Moroccan", and for most of them the explanation is simple "I've lived a Moroccan lifestyle for the past 24 years because my parents are traditional Moroccans". So, for them the Moroccan way of life is just a stated fact having to do with their upbringing and traditions. In this regard, family was reported to play a major role as one of the interviewees said: "We are typical Moroccans; we eat couscous and tagine, wear caftans to parties, and even go shopping at stores where we can buy Moroccan goods because we live in a traditional Moroccan family, which influences my way of life." (Interviewee 4).

The desire of Italian Moroccans to live the Moroccan way is confirmed by (Essers and Benschop 2006) who stated that There is already a whole industry devoted to "Moroccan weddings" due to the desire of many Moroccan immigrants to get married "the Moroccan way." Among the businesses in this branch are those that sell or rent Moroccan bridal gowns and jewelry, as well as those that cater events and sell Moroccan pastries, and bands that perform Moroccan music.

As for the 40% who find it 'hard to say' mostly offered the same argument they felt that their way of life was a mixture of the Moroccan and the Italian. For example, interviewee 5 said: "I enjoy Moroccan culture as well as Italian or western culture in general, and I sometimes adopt Moroccan and occasionally Italian ways of living. My primary style of living is Moroccan, as I am a native. I speak Arabic and eat Moroccan food. However, I also adopt some Western practices into my life, such as going out for drinks with friends after work, eating at KFC or McDonald's, listening to Italian music, and supporting the Milan football team, things like that". (interviewee 5). So, it was a matter dependable on the situation, at home with their families they lead a Moroccan life style, but at work or with friends they adopt the way of life of the community.

4.4. Dual Identity Negotiation

This section examines participants' sense of identity and emotional belonging through their self-reported attitudes toward Italian citizenship and Moroccan heritage. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with five statements about national pride, cultural comfort, and migration desires using a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree). The chart below presents the distribution of responses, revealing how Moroccan-Italians negotiate their dual cultural affiliations in everyday life.
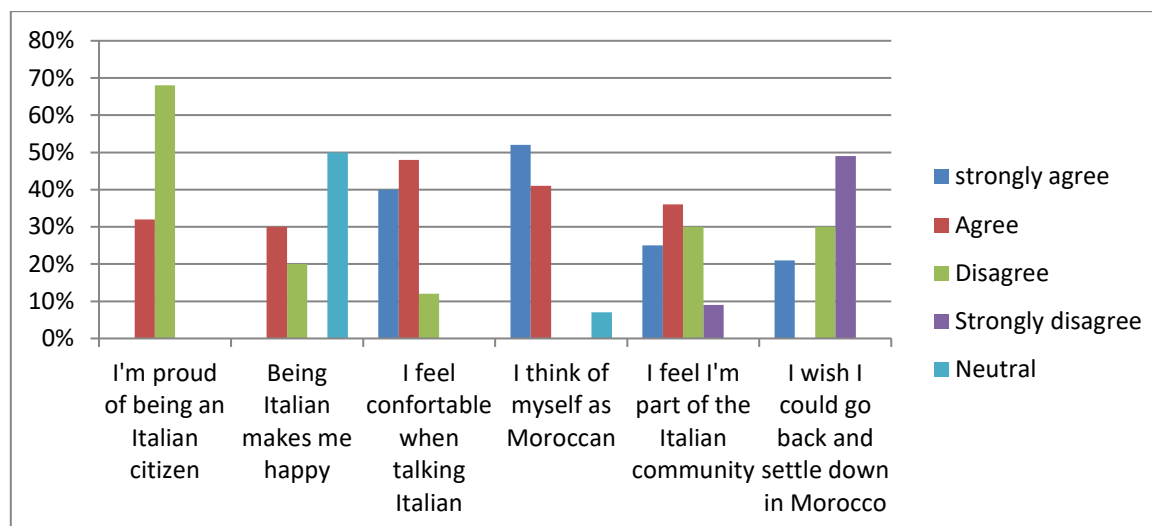
Graph 3. Dual Identity Negotiation

The results reveal a complex negotiation of dual identity among Moroccan-Italians, with 80% expressing pride in Italian citizenship and 70% feeling part of the Italian community, indicating strong civic belonging. However, cultural attachments persist, as 50% feel comfortable being perceived as Moroccan, and 60% associate speaking Italian with happiness, suggesting linguistic-cultural hybridity. Notably, only 20% desire to return to Morocco, while 50% reject this idea, demonstrating that while emotional ties to Morocco endure, practical integration in Italy predominates.

These findings illustrate strategic biculturalism, where individuals maintain Italian civic identity while preserving Moroccan cultural markers. The 30-40% neutral/disagree responses on cultural-linguistic items reveal identity negotiation rather than full assimilation, aligning with transnational identity theories (Vertovec, 2019). The data suggests successful structural integration in Italy coexists with nostalgic cultural connections, highlighting the need for policies supporting bilingualism and further research on generational differences in identity formation.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reveals a striking persistence of Moroccan identity among second-generation participants despite their Italian birth and fluency. As the data show, familial transmission of language and cultural practices during childhood established Moroccan identity as foundational, rendering Italian proficiency an acquired skill rather than a marker of belonging. These findings challenge linear assimilation models, instead supporting theories of transnational identity (Vertovec, 2019) and segmented assimilation (Portes & Rumbaut, 2017), which acknowledge how structural barriers and cultural attachment sustain diasporic identification across generations. The participants' strategic compartmentalization of language use - Italian for practical communication, Arabic and Moroccan cultural practices for identity maintenance - exemplifies what scholars term "strategic biculturalism" (Zapata-Barrero, 2021), a survival mechanism in exclusionary host environments.

These insights carry significant policy implications, particularly for European nations grappling with integration challenges. Education systems must move beyond monolingual immersion by implementing validated bilingual programs that recognize heritage languages as cultural assets. Citizenship laws require reform to address the identity dissonance experienced by birthright citizens who remain culturally marginalized. Most crucially, anti-discrimination efforts must confront the pervasive linguistic racism that renders even fluent Italian insufficient for full social acceptance (Alim et al., 2020). These measures would acknowledge the complex reality that language fluency and cultural identity operate along separate but intersecting axes in migrant experience.

5.1. Limitations

Although the present study's conclusions are supported by reliable data, they are still far from being conclusive. As a result, broad generalizations cannot be made from the results. This is mostly because the study was conducted on a sample that was somewhat tiny. Another restriction is that all of the responses are from the same city. Greater geographic coverage would have produced more accurate results. In addition, field research should have been done. Consequently, the study would have become more ethnographic, and the analysis might have given greater weight to the findings of the observation.

Therefore, this study's aim was to make an attempt to present some insight into the self-identification of Moroccan-Italian youth who were born or raised in Italy. We expect that more research will be conducted, covering a wider range of data and coming to more insightful and useful conclusions

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