

Book review

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Becky L. Schulthies, *Channeling Moroccanness: Language and the media of sociality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021; x + 221 pages) 5

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Channeling Moroccanness brings you into the homes of Fez residents, the Fassi, where we encounter their comments about communication failures to adequately connect as Moroccans. Failure may be due to the medium or due to language, but it turns out along the way of reading the book that the two cannot be neatly separated. Both are central in the phatic work of channeling. As can be recognized by the title of the book, the two key terms of the book are “channeling” and “Moroccanness.” Channeling refers here to linguistic codes that connect people and to media of communication. Schulthies argues that separating the two is a legacy of structural linguistics, but that “media could be both an intermediary and a mediator, a medium and an actor. Language and media forms could be the means to connect Moroccans, but also shape and even constrain what it meant to connect as Moroccans in Fez” (p. 26). Linguistic codes can open and constitute channels. Moroccanness, on the other hand, refers to discourse on how Moroccans ought to be. These comments originate in the failure of communicative channels, prompting comments, visions, and desires about how these failures should be adjusted. Communication failures thus render the gap between communicative practices and desires visible, and it is this gap which prompts the ideological comments on media and language. There is a third central concept underlying all discussions in this book: calibration. Calibration refers to the selective employment of bits and pieces of existing ideology that, triggered by communication failures, are put into the service of better connecting Moroccans. Discourse triggered by communicative failures is phatic in that it (re)produces social relationships between Moroccans. It is channeling Moroccanness though calibration. 10
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Channeling Moroccanness is a concise book, composed of five chapters, an introduction, and conclusions. All chapters are interspersed with ethnographic observations. They feature a total of 21 ethnographic episodes, often several pages long. The book also includes a 13-page appendix in which transcripts from recorded discourses are given. Research for the book draws exclusively on ethnographic work among Fassi. It involves a range of languages, among them *darīja* (Moroccan Arabic), *fushā* (literary Arabic), Modern Standard Arabic, French, and Tamazight. 35

This book is a work of integration. It (re)unites things and people, spoken and written language, and by doing so is in line with recent attention given to new materialism (Bennett 2010) or third-wave sociolinguistics (Eckert 2018). The key question addressed in this book is “What does it mean to relate as Moroccans when there is widespread feeling of communicative failure?” (p. 3). Each of the five core chapters 40

focuses on different channels and the communicative failures that are subject to debate or comment, while the introduction presents key concepts and sets the scene. 1

The first chapter is titled “A Fassi Linguascape” and gives an overview of the linguistic ecology of Fez. It pays attention to spoken language, the language of news broadcast, the linguistic land- and soundscape, but also to writing and (grassroots) orthographies. Morocco has for centuries been on the crossroads of linguistic and cultural encounters, and the legacies of these contacts shape the current sociolinguistic situation. This implies, among other things, that languages are not equal. Language in contact are languages in competition (Weinreich 1953), and the languages of Fez themselves feature regional, social, and ethnic variation. This implies that there is an abundance of linguistic and ideological playing material available for channeling Moroccanness. 5 10

The second chapter, “Literate Listening: Broadcast News and Ideologies of Reasoning,” discusses the different types of literacies that exist in Fez, how they are socially distributed, and with what effects for the consumption and discussion of media broadcast. Schulthies reports about a literacy ideology that distinguishes *lqāri* (one who reads) from *lwā’i* (one who is aware). This prompts the questions (p. 44): “What was (il) literate watching and listening, then? How did one learn literate listening in Morocco? What kinds of listening did one have to learn to be ‘aware’?” The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to these questions, and it explores how not being *lwā’i* relates to languages, literacies, and media. Specific literary skills are required for following specific spoken content on the news in a society where the state considers half the population to be undereducated. Writing in multiple languages, distributed literacies, listening, and reasoning intersect. 15 20

The third chapter turns attention to “Registering Media and Remediating a Register: Moroccan Morality Tales.” Morality tales on TV are not simply content to fill airtime. They are seen as an educative tool for modernizing Moroccan society. The traditionally transmitted moral storytelling of the past, known as *hadra lmizān*, has moved onto TV where it promotes and legitimizes political and societal agendas of the government. The programs also fulfill the role of linking contemporary Moroccanness to the past, and this ideological linkage is yet another process of channeling. 25 30

The fourth chapter, titled “Scripting Sounds and Sounding Scripts: Senses, Channels, and Their Discontent,” is also centered on morale. This time, however, it deals with the moral loading of language ideologies connected to *darīja*. Despite being the most widely used language in Morocco, and thus obviously the most appropriate language to unify all Moroccans, it does not enjoy the same status or ideological appreciation as *fushā* or French. Schulthies explores in this chapter the language ideologies underlying public language use and, more specifically, what the uses of *fushā* in public space tell us about their users, their communicative practices, and their requirements. She reports that for most Fassi she met “hearing writing speak was not a lost ideology or practice lost during modernity” (p. 110). By not sharing a Saussurean view that sound was simply a signal that triggered a mental representation, just as writing did, Fassis experience sound and writing in a sensory blended form. Advertising is a domain in which the modernist separation of individual languages, of script and sound, of reading and hearing, is surmounted with ease. 35 40

The last chapter, “Mediating Moroccan Muslims,” builds on insights from the chapters before. It integrates discussions about literacy, reading, and morality. Schulthies confesses to have hesitated to include a chapter on media and Islam as it “seems so reproductive of Euro-American phatic anxieties about mediums that radicalize Islam” (p. 140). However, programs and discussions about Islam are a central phatic activity in channeling Moroccanness and are therefore insightful for the topic explored in the book. As in the preceding chapters, the focus is on comments caused by perceived failures to connect appropriately. Since transculturality is a salient feature of Islam, Fassis’ frustration with failures of Moroccans to connect appropriately as Muslims turns out to be yet another “labor of phatic Moroccanness” (p. 167).

The concluding chapter is brief, but that is unsurprising for a book that builds and develops insights immanently from observation. It offers a neat summary of the book’s contribution to our understanding of language, media, and society in Morocco that is worthy to be quoted in full length:

Ideologies about channels, whether media, language forms, or kinds of persons, shaped the ways Fassis understood their social connectedness. So too did the everyday, emergent laments about communicative channel failures that allowed them opportunities to generate productive, often unrecognized social collectives. As I’ve tried to argue throughout the book, laments of communicative failure were Fassi attempts to unify Moroccans. (p. 169)

It is important to Fassis to be Moroccan, and to be so in contemporary, adequate ways. Language and media, and the connections they represent and establish, can be employed to this end. Most often, however, they are perceived to have failed in doing just this.

Throughout its chapters, *Channeling Moroccanness* shows that not much is certain in a nation with high diversity in languages, scripts, orthographies, and graphics that are unevenly distributed across society. Linguistic anthropology is a fitting approach to shed light onto this complex sociolinguistic situation. Like all ethnographies, this book needs to be read from cover to cover. It is therefore important to underline that *Channeling Moroccanness* book provides concise, pleasant, and fascinating reading for start to end. Observing and extrapolating everyday discourses that stretch over a period of 20 years is no small feat, and a noteworthy analytical achievement. Schulthies can also be complimented for having found an excellent balance between presenting ethnographic vignettes, their discussion, and the more abstract discussions of channeling. Always original, *Channeling Moroccans* is broadly informed about written and spoken language, and language and media ideologies. The book can be recommended to anyone reading the *Journal of Arabic Sociolinguistics*, and to students of societal multilingualism and of language ideology. They will find a well-written, vivid, theoretically informed discussion that draws on the wealth of two decades of ethnographic work. It appears desirable that the central idea of channeling should be taken up more widely by others and applied also to other societies.

LITERATURE

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