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Pluricentricity, iconisation, and instrumentalisation of language in North Africa and its diaspora

Abstract

This study deals with the central role of Tamazight in shaping '*Amazighness*', i.e., the translocal Amazigh group identity, influenced by social, political, and historical factors and fostered by linguistic 'pluricentricity'. Despite the prevalence of functionally dominant languages in daily interactions, discussions about Amazigh identity primarily revolve around Tamazight, highlighting its significant ethnic importance. However, there has been a recent shift in the portrayal of Tamazight, influenced by the evolving perception of Darija as part of Tamazight heritage and interactional repertoire. This shift is driven by governmental instrumentalisation of Tamazight, especially since its official recognition in Morocco and Algeria, alongside ongoing institutional Arabisation efforts. Despite these efforts, Arabisation has failed to replace Tamazight and Darija with Standard Arabic as intended, leading to a phenomenon termed 'Darijation'. The study also emphasises language's role in shaping culture, serving as a crucial aspect of both traditional and contemporary cultural practices. It shows that language not only acts as a conduit for cultural expression, but actively shapes culture itself through 'conventionalised heteroglossia'.

1. Introduction to the study

The present study examines how the Tamazight languages form an essential aspect of the Amazigh group identity, usually constructed in opposition to state hegemony, whether in North Africa or in the diaspora. Here, the term diaspora is defined broadly, encapsulating any population dissemination stemming from a shared origin. Regardless of the geographical, ethnical, social, historical, and political diversity of the *Imazighen* or Amazigh peoples – i.e., North Africa's indigenous peoples – and their claim, their recent unified ideological movement has engendered the appearance of a fresh 'postcolonial'

native ethnic group, the *pan-Amazigh* or simply the *Amazigh*, which is supported by a novel trans-local pan-Amazigh collective identity, i.e., *Amazighness*, widely promoted by means of the new media (Lafkioui 2011, 2013). North Africa, also called *Tamazgha* nowadays, in ancient times spanned from the Canary Islands to Egypt, and from the Mediterranean to the northern Sahel. This region is commonly referred to as the 'Maghreb' (al-Maghrib, meaning 'the West'). It denotes the western part of the 'Arab world', typically encompassing much of northern Africa, including the Sahara Desert, but excluding Egypt and Sudan, which are considered to be part of the 'Mashriq'—the eastern part of the Arab world. However, the term 'Maghreb' implies North Africa's Arab origin rather than its native Amazigh origin. Therefore, it is avoided by Amazigh activists, who are seeking linguistic and cultural rights within the challenging environment of Arabisation prevalent in the region.

There are about forty million Tamazight-speakers, six million of whom live in the diaspora. The largest number of Tamazight-speakers live in Morocco. The estimates there vary between thirty and seventy percent of the total population, regardless of their linguistic competencies. Many Tamazight languages are endangered, not only in North Africa's periphery, such as in Mauritania, but also in densely populated regions, such as in Kabylia (North Algeria), for instance.

Furthermore, I will demonstrate that the safeguarding and renewal of the Tamazight languages are associated with multilingualism, wherein various 'pluricentric' languages such as Arabic, French, and Spanish play a pivotal role in North Africa. These languages, along with so many others in the various North African and diasporic contexts wherein the Tamazight-speaking people live, not only form competing sociolinguistic resources within their multilingual repertoires, but also offer certain metalinguistic tools, enabling the renewal of the various writing systems of the Tamazight languages, their grammar, dictionaries, and even their literary canons.

I will also discuss how the Internet, as an instrument of globalisation, allows North African interactants to complete functions of their 'pluricentric' linguistic resources trans-locally and, accordingly, how digital media reposition these functions in the interactive – substantial and cognitive – space. Light will also be shed on the nature and function(s) of multilingualism in interethnic cultural contexts and the way their interactants jointly create language and cultural norms and accommodations and hence contributing to 'conventionalised heteroglossia' (Lafkioui 2019, 2021), which will be addressed in Section 4.

The interactional sociolinguistic approach is appropriate for this study, as it allows careful examination of the complex relationship between language, identity, and power (Goffman 1981; Gumperz 1982; Lafkioui 2019; among others), especially when globalisation processes and effects are involved, which is the case here. Central to this approach lies the fundamental emphasis placed on the 'interactants' rather than disembodied language, as they jointly construct and reconstruct meaning, and produce and reproduce cultural values, including identities and ethnicities.

Therefore, in this study, equally significant as the linguistic features are the extralinguistic features of the interactions, which relate to their historical, social, cultural, and political context. This expansion of the interactional paradigm incorporates concepts from linguistic ethnography and anthropology, particularly concerning the dynamics of 'power' and its instantiation through language, whether practiced or imagined (Blommaert 2010; Bourdieu 1982; Fairclough 1989; Gal 2006; Lafkioui 2013).

In doing so, the study acknowledges the significance of integrating multiple approaches to comprehend human interaction fully. This perspective has been a guiding force since the inception of my research into language and culture, inspired by my consistent engagement in fieldwork activities in North-Africa and in Europe from the mid-nineties. In other words, both the data and analysis presented here are fundamentally 'ecological' as they concern 'the study of interactions between any given language and its environment' (Haugen 1972). The data discussed were gathered in various offline and online contexts, forming a substantial ecological multilingual and multimodal corpus, constructed in Africa and in Europe (see Lafkioui 2015 for corpus methodology).

Accordingly, and as will be demonstrated in the forthcoming sections, my data and findings unveil certain shortcomings within both the 'pluricentric' and 'pluriareality' models, with the latter emerging as a relatively recent alternative to the former. Primarily, the pluricentric model, while normative in nature, fails to grasp the intricacies of the constantly evolving multilingual environments and their sociolinguistic amalgamations, particularly within the context of globalisation. The model's emphasis solely on the notion of 'centre' lacks nuance, with its definition often remaining ambiguous and typically implying a national standard that influences other language standards, usually originating from different nations. The concept of this 'centre' is usually intertwined with the process of nation-state-building and the symbolic significance it carries (e.g., Clyne 1992, Kloss 1967, Muhr et al. 2015, Silva da 2014, Stewart 1968). Conversely,

the pluriareality model adopts a more user-based and corpus-linguistic approach, delving into considerable linguistic analytical depth, as evidenced by works such as those by Elspaß and Dürscheid (2017) and Herrgen (2015). However, it falls short in interpreting these details within the broader sociopolitical framework, thereby overlooking significant sociological and anthropological mechanisms inherent in language representation and usage, both contemporary and historical.

Critique, similar to the aforementioned, can be found in Auer (2021), where he introduces the concept of 'multi-standard language' and which 'is simply one that is standardised differently in different states, whatever the reasons may be'. While the concept of 'multi-standard language' offers a broader framework for understanding multilingual contexts, it lacks specificity regarding the construction of corresponding typologies and their essential parameters. This limitation persists whether dealing with established or emerging sociopolitical contexts and whether conveyed from symmetrical or asymmetrical sociolinguistic positions. Consequently, it does not significantly contribute to the development of typologies tailored to the nuanced multilingualism encountered in Africa and its diaspora, which I term 'layered and stratified multilingualism' (Lafkioui 2008, 2013), a concept that will be examined further in following Section 2.

2. North Africa and its layered and stratified multilingualism

Multilingualism in North Africa is an ancient phenomenon and traces back as far as Antiquity at least, with for instance the famous bilingual inscription in Punic vs Numidian, dedicated to Masinissa (circa 238 BC–148 BC), King of Numidia, a kingdom which extended at its largest from the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Sahara to the south, and from Mauretania to the west, at the Muluya River, to Africa Proconsularis to the east. Despite the myriad of languages and cultures that have traversed North Africa, many of them no longer wield significant influence in contemporary power dynamics. However, some of them have left enduring linguistic traces. For instance, some fairly ancient loanwords from Latin and Greek are still present in Tamazight, serving as reminders of the region's rich multilingual heritage, e.g., the Latin *iugum > tayuga* 'pair of oxen', 'pair'.

The languages that continue to hold sway in contemporary power relations can be categorised into three periods. The first period traces back to the Middle Ages, commencing with the Islamic conquests from the 7th century

onwards. These conquests exerted a profound influence on North Africa's ancestral linguistic and cultural landscape. The colonisation endeavours primarily facilitated the introduction of Arabic and its various forms into the predominantly Tamazight-speaking habitat. Initially, the Arabisation process unfolded gradually, yet in contemporary times, it has surged with notable momentum, particularly after gaining independence from Western colonial powers in the 20th century. Arabisation then emerged as a central tenet of the newly established nation-states' policies.

In essence, North Africa embraced the policy of 'Institutional Arabisation', as described in Lafkioui (2011, 2013), effectively sidelining its own ancestral Tamazight languages and cultures in a radical departure from its historical trajectory. Arabisation seamlessly aligned with the nationalist governance model adopted by North African countries post-independence. It drew inspiration from both French centralist Jacobinism and Nasserist and Baathist pan-Arabism, amalgamating elements from both ideologies. Both ideologies advocate for the principle of uniformity: the concept of one nation-state corresponding to one territory, with a singular language and culture.

While North African nations initially sought to align with pan-Arabist movements (i.e., ʕurūba) to forge a united front against colonial powers, this alignment led to the adoption of the very ideas they had previously resisted. This included the assimilation of linguistic, cultural, and identity diversity. Strictly speaking, North Africa found itself still under a form of colonial rule—the Arab-Islamic nation—exploited by local central regimes to perpetuate their power while denying the Amazigh origins of their peoples, despite historical evidence to the contrary (see Lafkioui Forthcoming for an overview). To date, Institutional Arabisation has persistently aimed at establishing Standard Arabic as the national language, often invoking Islam as justification for this endeavour.

Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso stand out as exceptions to the Arabisation trend. In the context of Pan-Africanism, these countries have recognised the Tuareg languages as national languages, reflecting a political and linguistic ideology that acknowledges the significance of local languages for the socio-economic development of their regions. Consequently, unlike in the northern Amazigh regions, issues within the Tuareg communities are typically not contested along linguistic lines. However, despite this policy in favour of language diversity, a different approach is taken regarding writing systems. Since the 1960s, there has been a concerted effort to standardise the transcription of national languages, aligning with Pan-African ideals. Latin

script is predominantly used for this transcription, a homogenising measure that has received substantial political and financial backing from international organisations and religious institutions like the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Nevertheless, this push for uniformity has not always been warmly received by the Tuareg community, which has a centuries-old, if not millennia-old, tradition of using its native Tifinagh script.

The second period pertains to the wave of Western colonisation that commenced in the 14th century, leaving a considerable linguistic imprint along North Africa's coastline. This era witnessed the introduction of Portuguese, for instance, following the conquest of Ceuta (Rif region, North Morocco) in 1415. This marked the onset of Portuguese expansion into Africa, where it served as a lingua franca. The colonial influence intensified notably from the 19th century onwards, with languages such as Italian, French, and Spanish assuming prominence in North Africa's interactional repertoire. However, today, only French and Spanish retain substantial sociopolitical significance in the region.

The sociolinguistic landscape of North Africa has undergone profound transformations since the turn of the millennium, paralleling the broader processes of globalisation and technological advancement, thereby delineating the distinct third period. These shifts have facilitated greater multilingualism and multimodality, fostering an Amazigh cultural and political renaissance and thereby contributing to dehegemonisation efforts, as detailed in Section 4.

Globalisation and its associated sociopolitical pressures are challenging the dominant Arab-Islamic nationalist narrative that asserts North Africa's Arab origin. Accordingly, we are witnessing notable alterations in language politics in certain countries in the region. These alterations are prompting various population groups to reassess their identities, particularly those who have undergone complete Arabisation, including the ʕarubi populations (e.g., from Casablanca), many of whom believe they are descended from the Arab tribes that migrated to North Africa, especially from the 11th century onwards. The proliferation of DNA tests among these ʕarubi groups, often conducted by younger generations, frequently reveals an Amazigh (i.e., North African) origin. The revelation of Amazigh ancestry among these ʕarubi individuals and their subsequent quest for identity have sparked considerable debate on social media platforms. Presently, North Africa testifies to a complex sociolinguistic landscape characterised by 'layered and stratified multilingualism' (Lafkioui 2008, 2013). In this context, the various languages in use do not hold equal sociolinguistic status or serve identical sociocultural functions. Instead, the

sociolinguistic hierarchy of languages is primarily determined by national and local policies. Both offline and online, the activation or non-activation of different linguistic resources inevitably signifies variation in interactive functions and the social categories associated with them by the interactants. The main linguistic resources presently participating in North Africa's multilingual landscape include:

1. The Tamazight languages and their local varieties (Afroasiatic), which are indigenous to North Africa (see Section 3).

2. Darija or Darja (or variants), which is a gradually varying language continuum that spans North Africa and functions as a lingua franca, emerging from the interaction between Tamazight, its substratum and sole endogenous component, and Arabic since the 7th century. In addition to the substantial influences of Latin and Greek on Darija, adstrata of Tamazight since Antiquity, the impact of Portuguese, Spanish, and French is even more pronounced, with the latter two still actively contributing to its development, along with other 'pluricentric' languages like English. Consequently, Darija encompasses more than the commonly understood translation of 'Arabic dialect' or its national equivalents, like e.g. 'Moroccan Arabic', 'Tunisian Arabic', 'Libyan Arabic' or their abbreviated counterparts like e.g., 'Moroccan', etc. Hassaniyya is also part of this continuum, forming its peripheries not only geographically but also linguistically. Its distinctive features arise from contact with various sub-Saharan languages, such as Wolof (Niger-Congo). Hassaniyya is principally practiced in Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and the Western Sahara.

3. Sub-Saharan African languages, such as Songhay (Nilo-Saharan), Fula (Niger-Congo), and Hausa (Afroasiatic), which are regularly encountered as contact languages among the Zenaga and Tuareg Amazigh peoples in the Sahara and the northern Sahel.

4. Arabic, and its classical, standard, and colloquial varieties (Afroasiatic).

5. Indo-European languages: French and Spanish mainly as ex-colonial languages, next to English as 'the' international language.

Mother tongues and heritage languages, such as Tamazight, often hold the status of unofficial, minority, or second language (L2), making it challenging for them

to compete with dominant languages like Standard Arabic—the language of Islam and its *ʔumma*, the transnational Arab-Islamic nation—or languages such as French, the sole official language in France, or even English, widely regarded as the preeminent international language, gaining increasing social and interactive significance in the wake of the electronic revolution. 'Heritage language' refers here to any given minority language acquired at home or in social contexts that promote languages other than the dominant ones, typically native or immigrant languages.

As a result, the structures and functions of linguistic resources exhibit a layered and stratified (i.e., hierarchical) nature, contingent upon the context and the interactive position from which the interactions occur. These positions may be categorised as socio-politically or culturally dominant, affording high status (e.g., Standard Arabic in North African public institutions), or dominated, with low status (e.g., Tamazight in North African public institutions and spaces), or somewhere in-between (e.g., Darija in N. African public institutions and spaces, including in Tamazight-speaking regions). In alignment with this linguistic stratification, identities, as interactive semiotic productions constructed during socio-cultural interactions, are likewise layered and stratified (Lafkioui 2013).

Furthermore, Darija is progressively assuming the role of a lingua franca in North Africa, permeating even contexts traditionally reserved for dominant languages. For instance, discussions on French literature in academic settings, where the presence of Standard French was once predominant, now observe a notable presence of Darija. This trend is particularly evident when codeswitching occurs, also including Tamazight. The growing prevalence of Darija across various interactional domains is a direct consequence of Institutional Arabisation, which designated Standard Arabic as the sole official language. This policy was reinforced across all societal levels in the 1980s and intensified further since the 1990s. As a result, even subjects previously taught in French, such as mathematics, are now predominantly taught in Standard Arabic in national education systems, often interspersed with codeswitching involving Darija, French, or English.

In North Africa, the process of Institutional Arabisation persists as a significant sociopolitical endeavour deeply rooted in Arab-Islamic culture. Despite its persistence, this policy, which aims to promote Standard Arabic across various domains, notably fails to fully supplant the widespread use of

Darija. This reality underscores a shift from Arabisation towards what can be termed 'Darijation' – the systematic adoption and proliferation of Darija throughout all strata of society, including formal interactional settings. Darija now pervades North African society, particularly gaining momentum in Morocco, where until recently the majority was Tamazight-speaking, some even exclusively so, especially in rural areas. The aggressive implementation of Arabisation initiatives in the 1990s in Morocco and Algeria dramatically altered the sociolinguistic landscape, precipitating a rapid transition from Tamazight to Darija. This shift, closely linked to the promotion of Sunni Islam, strategically employed religious institutions, exemplified by the establishment of the 'Institut Mohammed VI pour la formation des Imams Morchidines et Morchidates' in 2013 by the Moroccan monarchy. Within such institutions and others of similar nature, imams undergo specialised training and are strategically positioned to promote the adoption of Standard Arabic within the framework of Islam. This move served dual purposes: thwarting the spread of Shiism while coercing Tamazight speakers to relinquish their native tongue in favour of Darija, often perceived by policymakers as a dialect of Standard Arabic, thus advancing the Arabisation agenda. Consequently, many Tamazight speakers adopt Darija not only as their primary language but also as the medium of instruction for their children, driven by aspirations for academic success and societal integration, sometimes compounded by religious motivations. Notably, certain religious figures, including official imams, actively disparage Tamazight and its cultural traditions, such as *Yennayer*, the Tamazight New Year celebration (around January 12th), often denouncing them while paradoxically speaking in the very language they seek to undermine.

These findings underscore a crucial inquiry into how the so-called 'Tamazight project' navigates the complex landscape of language policies in Morocco and across North Africa, where similar political mechanisms prevail. Specifically, the question arises: how can Tamazight hope to survive, let alone thrive, when dominant political entities establish commanding institutions like the 'Institut Mohammed VI pour la formation des Imams Morchidines et Morchidates' at the very heart of societal interaction? Institutions such as these, operating under the guise of religious and nationalist ideologies, wield significant control over societal discourse and exert influence both locally and beyond. Remarkably, media reports have highlighted instances where 'official' imams dispatched to Europe for the propagation of Islam and Standard Arabic have been implicated in matters relating to extremism, espionage, and drug-

related offenses. These ideological bastions serve as potent gatekeepers for the ruling class, exerting considerable influence over social media platforms due to their global reach and impact.

3. Tamazight, the icon of Amazighness or *Tamuzgha*

Tamazight represents the native language family of North Africa, encompassing approximately forty languages and their local varieties, forming a branch within the broader Afroasiatic phylum. Mutual intelligibility is somewhat possible between neighbouring languages or languages of the same type. If not, formal education or prolonged interaction is required to understand and speak the different languages well. Even within the same language, variation can be significant, to the extent that intelligibility between certain local varieties becomes challenging, such as in Tarifit or Rif Tamazight—a language prevalent in the North, Northeast, and Northwest regions of Morocco, characterised by a continuum structure (Lafkioui 2020). In essence, the distribution of the Tamazight languages throughout North Africa resembles a continuum, where distinctions between them are not always clear-cut, as one language transitions into another without distinct boundaries (Lafkioui 2018, Forthcoming).

Tamazight serves as the endogenous term for any language within the Tamazight family. For instance, it represents the language practiced by the Tuaregs of Mali, where the local variant 'Tamajaq' is utilised, as well as the language practiced by the Icawiyen of northeastern Algeria (Aures area), who currently employ the neologism 'Tacawit' or the Arabised term 'Shawiya' for their language. In English, the masculine form 'Amazigh' language is also employed, a calque of the widely used term 'Berber' in academic discourse. The term Berber is typically employed when referring to a specific Tamazight language or the entire language family, as well as when referencing the ethnic origin of individuals and thus their ethnonym or anthroponym. As an ethnonym, the endogenous generic equivalents of Berber are 'Amazigh' (*amaziɣ*, masculine singular) and 'Tamazight' (*tamaziɣt*, feminine singular), with their respective plural forms being 'Imazighen' (*imaziɣen*) and 'Timazighin' (*timaziɣin*). Although the term Berber generally lacks negative connotations in contemporary academic discourse, particularly within the field of linguistics, using 'Tamazight' and 'Amazigh' would be more appropriate for primarily two reasons:

1) There is a concern for scientific and historical accuracy in favour of terms related to 'Amazigh', as they are endonyms derived from the nomen agentis with the *m*-prefix, *m-zɣ*, derived from the root *zɣ* (or its allophone *zq*),

denoting 'to live', 'to dwell', and similar concepts (Chaker, 1987). This root often appears synchronously in the triconsonantal form *zdɣ. Conversely, 'Berber' is an exonym derived from the Greek 'barbaros' (singular) and its plural 'barbaroi', which the ancient Greeks used to describe non-Greek-speaking peoples. The term was adopted into Latin as 'barbarus' meaning 'non-Roman to the Romans', then into Arabic as 'barbar', to which the connotation of 'savage' was later added over time. It spread in Europe through Spanish as 'bereber' and French as 'berbère', particularly during the 19th century through colonisation campaigns.

2) Out of respect for the native interactants of the languages and cultures under study, who commonly reject the term Berber due to its negative connotations, it is only appropriate to use endonyms in scientific contexts if requested by the native communities, despite certain outdated academic traditions. However, academia tends to exhibit inertia, resulting in a slow transition from the exonym 'Berber' to the endonym 'Tamazight'. Thus, a simultaneous use of both terms is often observed, including in my own practice, despite my efforts since the outset of my career to promote the use of endogenous terms. It is worth noting that until very recently, the adoption of the term Tamazight or its variants was not widely accepted within academic circles, particularly in Europe. Moreover, in North Africa, it was often prohibited and penalised for political reasons, compelling many researchers to resort to exogenous terms such as 'Berber'.

Tamazight encompasses ancient language forms known as Libyan or Numidian, which trace back to the 5th-10th century BCE. These ancient forms gave rise to both ancient and current Tifinagh scripts. Tifinagh serves as the native Amazigh writing system, still employed by the Tuaregs today, predominantly residing in the Sahara and northern Sahel regions, also known as southern Tamazgha. Over several decades, Tifinagh, particularly the Neo-Tifinagh iteration evolved from its original form, has been adopted in the northern regions of Tamazgha, notably in Morocco following the integration of Tamazight into official education in 2003; see e.g. Figure 1 showcasing its official appearance on public road signs in Agadir (Southern Morocco) in 2019.

Despite the gradual adoption of Neo-Tifinagh as a script and Tamazight as a language alongside Standard Arabic in certain official contexts in Morocco and Algeria, the adoption process lacks systematicity and accuracy. Both countries are currently in the process of developing a standard form of Tamazight—with one based on the Tifinagh script and the other on the Latin script—that aims to represent the various Tamazight languages, at least at their nation-state level.

However, these official standardisation efforts face significant opposition, particularly from Tamazight-speaking communities, due to the often-inadequate results and their limited application in society, including in education and administration.

One major concern is the insufficient consideration given to the regional and local entrenchment of the language, which reflect significant demographic, sociocultural, and historical diversity. For example, the linguistic landscape of Taqbaylit, practiced in Kabylia (Northern Algeria; sedentary and Mediterranean, mainly Sunni Muslims), differs from that of Tamzabit (aka Tumẓabt), used by the Mozabites (sedentary Ibāḍī Muslims; Ibāḍism being a branch of Islam, usually placed under Kharijism) in the northern Sahara of Algeria, as well as from Tamahaq, the language of the Tuaregs in the Ahaggar area (Southern Algerian Sahara, Western Libya, and Northern Niger; mainly Sunni Muslims), where they lead a predominantly (pastoral) nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle.

The official institutions tasked with standardising Tamazight—the Haut Commissariat de l'Amazighité (HCA) in Algeria (established in 1995) and the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe (IRCAM) in Morocco (established in 2001)—have not only failed in their 'Tamazight project' but also face uncertain futures. Their functions and initiatives are subject to government decisions, which can lead to their dissolution, reduction, or merger. For example, there has been ongoing debate about dissolving or merging IRCAM, despite being not even halfway towards achieving the objectives set when it was founded two decades ago by King Mohammed VI.

It is important to note that the Tamazight project is under significant political pressure to quickly deliver a 'Standard Tamazight'. However, meeting this demand is practically impossible if handled correctly. Any serious standardisation effort should consider the complexity of Tamazight, which comprises several languages, some of which have received little or no study or documentation, some are even at risk of extinction (see Lafkioui Forthcoming). Thus, there is still much work to be done for the success of the Tamazight project, not only academically but also practically, especially in areas such as language education, where expertise is lacking in both quality and quantity.

The implementation of the Tamazight project has stagnated for some time, this is particularly evident in the education sector. For example, in Morocco, despite promises to expand Tamazight education starting from 2003, progress has been slow. It was anticipated that by 2010, Tamazight education would be available at every level, from primary to university, across the country,

including in Arabic-speaking regions. This aligns with Article 5 of the Moroccan Constitution of 2011, revised after significant popular protests earlier that year, which grants Tamazight co-official status alongside Standard Arabic. Yet, the wording of the article is subject to interpretation and debate (see Lafkioui 2013 for details):

> L'arabe demeure la langue officielle de l'état. L'état oeuvre à la protection et au développement de la langue arabe, ainsi qu'à la promotion de son utilisation. De même l'amazighe constitue une langue officielle de l'état, en tant que patrimoine commun à tous les Marocains sans exception.
> 'Arabic remains the official language of the State. The state ensures the protection and development of the Arabic language as well as the promotion of its use. Amazigh is likewise an official language of the State, as a common heritage of all Moroccans without exception.'

However, the current state of education in Morocco falls short of expectations, as Tamazight education is limited to primary grades and suffers from inadequate quality, partly due to a shortage of qualified teaching staff and insufficient pedagogical materials. It is hoped that the Moroccan government, under Prime Minister Aziz Akhannouch, will address these shortcomings and fulfil the promises made in 2003 and reiterated in Organic Law No. 26-16 of 2019. One of the major challenges with the Moroccan constitutional reform is its gradual approach to formalising Tamazight, relying on decisions to be voted on in parliament. This formulation suggests that the official recognition of Tamazight is more symbolic than substantive, as it contends with the significant political influence of proponents of nationalist pan-Arabism. Similar dynamics are observed in Algeria, where Arabisation policies hold sway. Elsewhere in North Africa, Tamazight holds even less weight in current sociopolitical discussions, particularly at an official level.

The current situation reflects how Tamazight and its advocacy have been heavily instrumentalised since its acceptance as a 'national' and subsequently 'official' language in Algeria and Morocco since the 1990s. This instrumentalisation is particularly evident in public education. For example, numerous instances exist of haphazard hiring practices, where teachers are recruited without any knowledge of Tamazight, lacking appropriate training, and demonstrating no interest in teaching it. Another troubling aspect is the low standard of education and research offered in the new Tamazight departments at the universities, with serious ethical issues such as fraud and sexual

harassment being reported. Consequently, some Tamazight scholars prefer to remain in their original departments, such as French or English, rather than joining the Tamazight departments. This situation aligns with the broader trend of educational inflation and erosion in North Africa, with Tamazight bearing a disproportionate burden, possibly the highest.

In fact, a notable decline in the use of Tamazight is observable across North Africa and its diaspora, even in regions with a significant Tamazight-speaking population, such as Southern Morocco where Tashelhit is prevalent. Darija is steadily replacing Tamazight across all social strata, while Standard Arabic is supplanting French and Spanish, particularly among the educated middle class. This trend stems from various deep-seated structural sociopolitical dynamics, foremost among them being Institutional Arabisation (see Section 2).

Despite the official recognition of Tamazight in Morocco in 2011 and in Algeria in 2016, there has been little tangible progress in the Imazighen's struggle for their language and culture rights, both within these countries and elsewhere in North Africa. On the contrary, there is a growing apprehension among Amazigh activists that the official acknowledgment of their language is primarily symbolic. Not only have the promised advancements failed to materialise, but there is also evidence of a hardening and rightward shift in policymaking, mirroring a broader trend observed within its diaspora, particularly in the 'Global North'.

Structurally, North Africa's Tamazight policy presents a complex blend of contradictory measures, leading some critics to believe it is intentionally ambiguous. For instance, since 2024, Morocco has officially recognised *Yennayer* (the Amazigh New Year) as a holiday, yet simultaneously refuses to release unlawfully imprisoned individuals, including numerous Rifian activists like Zefzafi. The Hirak, a grassroots protest movement that emerged in 2010 during the commonly referred to 'Arab Spring', gained momentum following the tragic death of fishmonger Mohcine Fikri in October 2016 in Al Hoceima, located in the Rif area (North Morocco). This event served as a catalyst, amplifying longstanding grievances against social and political oppression within the region. The Hirak has resonated across North Africa and gained significant traction in Algeria since 2019. Present-day North African regimes employ stringent censorship and repression against individuals advocating strongly for Tamazight, particularly when such advocacy aligns with calls for regional independence or greater autonomy, as witnessed in certain activist circles in the Rif region.

Another telling example of the disparity between political decisions and actual implementation in North Africa is the ongoing refusal of Moroccan administrative institutions to register Amazigh first names for newborns. These names are excluded because they are not on the list of officially recognised Arabic and Islamic names, despite the constitutional acknowledgment of Tamazight as the 'common patrimony of all Moroccans without exception' (Article 5 of the Reformed Constitution, as mentioned earlier). Consequently, the National Council of Moroccan Languages and Cultures has failed in its mission 'to protect and promote Arabic, Tamazight, and various Moroccan cultural expressions', thereby undermining the concrete implementation of the Tamazight project on Moroccan territory. Similar incidents are reported elsewhere in North Africa.

As a result, the Imazighen who have not succumbed to the allure of Tamazight's instrumentalisation—commonly referred to as ḥubza, a Darija term denoting clientelism—have no option but to continue their struggle for language, cultural, and identity rights through non-governmental networks, as they have done to this day. Despite these challenges, ongoing scientific research, increased and diversified cultural production and dissemination, and the promotion of cultural heritage by numerous non-governmental networks have propelled Tamazight languages and cultures into greater social and political visibility in recent decades (see Section 4).

Note that it was only with the creation of the new nation-states after independence that a 'transnational collective' Amazigh claim began to take shape in North Africa and its diaspora. This pluralist movement was primarily triggered by the exclusion of the Imazighen, despite their significant contribution to achieving independence, from decision-making and institutional power positions in the newly established pan-Arab-Islamic states. The constitutions of these states completely disregarded Tamazight language and culture, proclaiming (Standard) Arabic as the sole official language, thereby denying their rights outright (except for the Tuareg case in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso, as discussed in Section 2).

It is remarkable that with the establishment of independent nation-states during the 20th century, many Imazighen not only adopted Standard Arabic as their official language—often under sociopolitical pressure—but also embraced an Arab-Islamic identity. Consequently, numerous North Africans now identify as Arabs, despite their Amazigh origin. This is remarkable because in other parts of the Islamic world, the conversion to Islam or the adoption of an Arabic variety

typically has not resulted into the rejection or neglect of native languages and identities (e.g., in Iran, Turkey, Indonesia).

In North Africa, only those who speak Tamazight are commonly regarded as Amazigh. Hence, language equals identity. This underscores why the struggle for increased rights among the Imazighen predominantly revolves around the recognition and preservation of the Tamazight languages. Tamazight holds immense significance as the primary symbol of Amazighness, as it shapes crucial institutional power dynamics. The Imazighen have long recognised the profound link between language, power, and territory, even employing it in their governance, as seen in the establishment of renowned Andalusian dynasties like the Almoravids and Almohads during the 11th to 13th centuries (see e.g., Ghouirgate 2015, Meouak 2006). Both Tamazight and Tifinagh serve as symbolic markers—icons—of the pan-Amazigh collective identity or 'Amazighness' (*amazighité* in French), increasingly referred to as *Tamuzgha* in Tamazight (or variants), formally as well as colloquially.

Yet, significant changes have occurred recently regarding the representation of Tamazight in relation to how Darija is perceived. Remarkably, Darija is no longer solely viewed as the mother tongue of Arabic speakers or Arabs, nor as a language spoken by 'lost' Imazighen, but increasingly as part of the Tamazight heritage. There is a growing emphasis, particularly on social media, on the assertion that Darija should not be labelled simply as an 'Arabic dialect'. Instead, for some, Darija is seen as an integral part of Tamazight, a hybrid language. For others, it is considered distinctively North African, with a significant influence from Tamazight. This recent cognitive shift in the representation of Darija is primarily driven by its significant role in the lives of many North Africans. Two key factors contribute to this shift: firstly, the awareness among Amazigh people of the pivotal transition from Tamazight to Darija, prompting them to seek explanations, especially if they have lost proficiency in Tamazight or never acquired it. Secondly, there is a growing realisation among Darija-speakers of their Amazigh descent, leading some to indirectly claim this heritage. Additionally, for many Darija-speakers, this shift represents an opportunity to capitalise on the Amazigh issue, both institutionally (e.g., in education and administration) and economically (e.g., in business and banking).

Furthermore, within the diaspora, the concept of Amazighness is becoming less closely tied to Tamazight. This trend is particularly noticeable among young individuals who may not be fluent in their heritage language and

who live in superdiverse environments shaped by significant migration-related sociocultural diversity. These young people often express their Amazigh identity through potent symbols, such as adopting names associated with historical figures like Yughurta and Dihiya. However, there is a risk associated with the overuse of such powerful symbols, especially when they are employed out of context. As a matter of fact, this can lead to a dilution of their significance and undermine their effectiveness as a means of asserting Amazigh identity. This phenomenon is not limited to the diaspora but is also observed in North Africa, where various symbols, customs, rituals, and events of Amazigh culture and history are sometimes magnified and turned into folklore, thereby stripped of their content. One example of this is the traditional Amazigh tattoo practice, a phenomenon that is increasingly experiencing sociocultural distortion.

4. Conventionalised heteroglossia and globalised identity

Based on over two decades of fieldwork conducted in North Africa and its diaspora, this study delves into the significance of 'conventionalised heteroglossia' (Lafkioui 2019, 2021) in the accommodation, socialisation, and emancipation of multilingual interactants. It particularly highlights the role of multilingualism in minority communities, considering their demographic and political contexts. The concept of 'conventionalised heteroglossia' pertains to multilingual interactions relating to diverse intersubjective voices construed from diverse sociocultural interactional positions within specific, yet dynamic, conventionalised multilingual interactional frameworks. Accordingly, 'conventionalised' refers to the joint management of polyphony within these interactions, contingent upon the nature of their heteroglossia, the framework in which they occur, and the extent to which they have become routinised.

Detailed cases in point can be found in Lafkioui (2019, 2021), which address the phenomenon and dynamics of 'francophonie'. More precisely, the studies examine how the French language contributes to shaping collective identities within francophone communities in Flanders and Brussels, contrasting those with North African heritage with those rooted in Flemish culture. The studies focus on their language usage primarily in informal settings, including artistic expression. In doing so, the studies reveal the emergence of what is termed 'global French' or *le français globalisé*, which represents the emergence and utilisation of French within the context of globalisation, characterised by its hybrid form and content. They also highlight a remarkable form of multilingual codeswitching that involves structurally incongruent languages, which are

genetically or typologically distinct. This emphasises the significance of 'conventionalised heteroglossia' in facilitating such linguistic practices. Furthermore, the studies illustrate how multilingual codeswitching in 'glocal' interactions play a role in challenging and redefining specific sociocultural dynamics, such as the correlation between languages and social as well as ethnocultural identities.

Additionally, due to digital communication, numerous political minorities, such as the Imazighen, have acquired a significant forum for preserving and developing their ancestral languages and cultures. Online platforms like YouTube serve as accessible avenues for learning and community engagement. It should be noted that across North Africa and its diaspora, Tamazight education primarily occurs through non-governmental channels, spanning local associations, family networks, and media outlets such as radio, television, and the Internet.

The rise of digital media is especially significant for the Imazighen as it amplifies their voices and strengthens their Amazighness. This amplification not only aids in the preservation of Tamazight language and culture among its native speakers and supporters but also garners attention from international interest groups, contributing to the enduring legacy of Amazighness. The Internet, serving as a tool of globalisation, empowers interactants of linguistic minorities to leverage their language resources across geographical boundaries, thereby transcending local limitations. It enables them to relocate and utilise these resources within interactive spaces, encompassing both substantial and cognitive dimensions. Therefore, the Tamazight languages which, in North Africa, are generally regarded as 'dialects' of 'minorities' with minor socio-cultural status – except for the recent but precarious change in Morocco, Algeria – can gain in social and cultural power through translocal transfer via the Internet. Paradoxically, Tamazight-interactants aiming to empower their ancestral language through translocal means often resort to utilising functionally dominant languages. They regularly express themselves in languages such as Standard French, Standard European Spanish, Standard Arabic, or their colloquial varieties to further educational, creative, or political purposes relating to Tamazight.

Although digital media offer various avenues to enhance and broaden the semiotic potential of languages and their associated cultures, these platforms also operate as institutions with distinct frameworks and gatekeeping functions (Lafkioui 2008, 2013). This holds true for minority groups, including the

Tamazight minorities and their sociopolitical aspirations. An exemplary instance of such a gatekeeping institutionalised framework can be found in the digital channel known as 'Berbère Télévision', one of the pioneers in its field, dedicated to establishing and promoting language norms and representations through its lectures in Taqbaylit (i.e., Kabyle Tamazight; North Algeria). While these lectures focus on Taqbaylit specifically, the channel, website editors, and the e-lecturer themselves present them as 'Tamazight'. Despite the absence of a unified or standardised Tamazight for the entire Tamazight language family, whether based on the Latin, Arabic, or Tifinagh script, labelling them as Tamazight *tout court* signifies the participants' intention to transmit the Amazigh legacy (language and culture) in a 'modern' social and cultural format imbued with literacy and linguistic uniformity. This objective is evident during the lectures, where the e-teacher consistently employs Taqbaylit neologisms to construct unique meta-linguistic content and educational argumentative structure. Interestingly, while e-tutors commonly use many neologisms in Tamazight, they often reformulate them in French or another pluricentric language such as Spanish, Dutch, or Arabic, for cognitive and interactive purposes, such as memorisation and maintaining attention. In several Taqbaylit recordings on Berbère Télévision with one of the primary tutors, a genuine effort is made to teach solely in Taqbaylit, even when explaining and reformulating numerous neologisms used. Although not the most prevalent practice compared to other online courses, it is not uncommon, particularly in certain activist circles, where it is considered to be the ideal.

Thus, pluricentric multilingual reformulation practices facilitate ongoing verification of how discourse objects, such as language features of Tamazight, are categorised and named, fulfilling meta-communicative functions. Presenting Tamazight as a 'unified' and 'written' language not only meets the widespread demands and pressures for 'modernity', but also enhances it interactively by elevating its social and cultural status, a transformation I have observed over the past two decades.

The choice of a Latin-based orthographic system for many of these e-courses and much of the shared digital content in Tamazight further reinforces this status, as Latin is widely regarded, both in academic circles and among activists, as the most viable and 'modern' option for writing Tamazight languages. However, the Tifinagh writing system remains a significant contender in the Tamazight orthography debate. The Moroccan IRCAM's adoption of Neo-Tifinagh characters for their literacy practices has influenced

the direction of orthographic dynamics of Tamazight languages in North Africa and its diaspora. An illustrative example is depicted in Figure 2, showcasing the instruction of Tamazight in Zwara, Libya, facilitated by a local network. Certain Libyan local networks are transitioning to adopt the Moroccan IRCAM notation instead of the previously utilised Latin-based script. This transition is motivated by the involvement of the IRCAM, which is supplying teachers along with their corresponding teaching curricula and materials, subsequent to the overthrow of Qaddafi's regime. However, it is important to acknowledge that these materials have limitations and mainly concentrate on the Tamazight languages of Morocco.

It is noteworthy that Tamazight languages are predominantly represented through 'non-standardised' Latin-based scripts, occasionally tailored to Tamazight phonetics, whereas Tifinagh or Neo-Tifinagh characters are often portrayed as such. Compared to a decade ago, online participants show much less concern for orthography and increasingly adopt the 'respelling' practice (Shortis 2009) recorded for other online languages, which entails a more flexible, creative, and dynamic writing approach than standard orthographies.

Accordingly, digital communication reframes dominant languages, such as French, away from an asymmetric system where it holds a dominant and normative position, towards a more symmetric system where its sociolinguistic functions are locally negotiated and assessed. This fosters a 'more multi-centered sociolinguistic culture' (Coupland 2009). Although the norms thus created may be informal, unstable, and often characterised by an amateurish or impressionistic quality, they are significant as they emerge from debates in which Tamazight languages are viewed as valuable cultural assets, as cultural capital. Any use of Tamazight, whether formulaic or creative, is highly emblematic of Amazighness and indirectly contributes to the construction of intersubjective spaces that bolster the Amazigh claim. Indeed, the very discourse surrounding Tamazight languages, including conflicts, underscores their importance as cultural assets and icons of Amazighness. Consequently, their acquisition is greatly esteemed and celebrated. While there is room for negotiating Tamazight language and cultural norms and representations, the Amazigh websites, much like offline contexts, serve as gatekeepers, regulating to some extent the language and cultural features, functions, and contextualisation.

Within the context of the Amazigh claim, any language practice observed on these websites—regardless of whether it employs Tamazight—is regarded as

evidence of 'cultural capital' that signals Amazighness, which is inherently shared by all participants in the online interaction, even those who may contest it. Therefore, each Amazigh website operates as a 'framed space' (Goffman, 1981: 230), reflecting an overall pro-Amazigh intersubjective viewpoint and providing a foundational framework for interpreting online discourses. This framework, termed as 'framing discourse à la Amazigh' (Lafkioui 2013), offers a comprehensive template for understanding the online discussions within the context of Amazighness and its aspirations.

5. Conclusion

The study highlights that Tamazight primarily defines 'Amazighness', representing the translocal Amazigh group identity, shaped by social, political, and historical factors. Consequently, discussions concerning Amazigh identity often revolve around Tamazight, despite the predominant use of functionally dominant (pluricentric) languages in everyday interactions. Language choice in North Africa is heavily ethnicised, particularly when individuals explicitly express their ethnic and cultural identity. However, there has been a recent shift in the representation of Tamazight, influenced by the changing perception of Darija as part of the Tamazight heritage and interactional repertoire. This shift is primarily driven by the governments' strong instrumentalisation of Tamazight, especially since its official status in Morocco and Algeria. Simultaneously, these regimes continue their Institutional Arabisation efforts, aiming to promote the spread and development of Standard Arabic. Despite the implementation of various domination policies, including religious control, Arabisation has failed to supplant Tamazight as well as Darija with Standard Arabic as intended. This phenomenon, termed 'Darijation' in the study, is a collateral effect of Arabisation, with Tamazight bearing the brunt of its consequences. Consequently, for neoliberal capitalist motives, North African governments heavily instrumentalise both Tamazight and Darija. Furthermore, the research reveals that language not only serves as a medium for performing culture, but also actively shapes culture itself through its performative nature, engaging in 'conventionalised heteroglossia'. Language is integral to both traditional and contemporary cultural activities, constantly being redefined in dialogical and contextual interactions, with linguistic diversity and pluricentricity providing fertile ground for cultural expression and evolution.

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Figure 1. "official" multilingual public road signs in Agadir (S. Morocco)

Figure 2. Learning to write in Neo-Tifinagh in Libya
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