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The Tamazight (Berber) Language Profile

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I. The Tamazight language and the Amazigh people

Tamazight or Amazigh language¹, also referred to as Berber in western literature, is the language spoken by Amazigh people, the indigenous of Tamazgha (North Africa plus Mali, Niger and the Canary Islands). Before the arrival of the Arabs in that region, which started around the mid-seventh century, Tamazight was spoken all over the area stretching from the Siwa Oasis in western Egypt, extending westward to the Canary Islands through Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and from the northern coast of the Mediterranean Sea extending southward to Mauritania, Mali and Niger.

Tamazight belongs to the African branch of the Afro-Asian language family, also referred to as Hamito-Semitic in the literature, along with ancient Egyptian and other African languages such as the ones called Cuchitic and Chadic languages, as opposed to the oriental or Semitic branch constituted of semitic languages. Ancient Egyptian is somehow disputed between these two branches (see Vergote, 1970). The question as to whether these languages started in Africa or the Middle East along with the Semitic languages is still controversial and goes beyond the field of linguistics since it involves archaeology, as well as pre-history and paleontology. Although the oriental hypothesis had long prevailed, recent research has brought to new evidence favoring the African alternative hypothesis (Hachid, 2000). It is too early even today to take any hypothesis for granted as more research has to be done in this field. Given the similarities, the possibility that the substrata of these languages are African with an important eastern influence from Semitic languages is the most plausible, although a western influence of Semitic languages from the African branch, namely Egyptian, is not to be excluded.²

It is difficult to put forward any number evaluating the Tamazight-speaking population because no census taking this question into consideration has ever been made in any country in North Africa since decolonization. Tamazight is still spoken today in all the aforementioned countries, with the exception of the Canary Islands, where a cultural movement claiming the revival of Tamazight is growing. Besides Tamazgha, one has to mention the Amazigh Diaspora in Europe and North America, where the Amazigh community is important.

The areas where Tamazigh is spoken are not continuous. Rather, they constitute more or less large islands distant from one another, interrupted by large arabized zones. As a result, Tamazight has survived mostly in somehow naturally 'protected' areas. The zones where it is spoken today are either desertic or mountainous while most of the plain zones were arabized. The lack of contact between these areas has led to an important dialectalization process. However, the nature of the dialectical variation is more phonological and lexical than syntactic (grammatical).

Except for the varieties spoken in central Morocco, which has always been referred to as Tamazight, and those spoken by the Tuareg populations, referred to as Tamachaq or Tamajaq³, most other dialects were renamed, locally referred to by names the Arab tribes gave to those areas and their inhabitants when they arrived there.

Morocco: there are three important Tamazight-speaking areas in Morocco. The variety spoken in the Riffian mountainous area (including Ayt Werrayghel, Beni Zennasen, El Hoceima, etc.) is referred to as Tarifit. This variety also includes the form spoken in Melilla and Ceuta, two enclaves located in the Riffian area, which belong to Spain. Heading south, we come across another important Tamazight-speaking area in

central Morocco, stretching all along the mountainous Middle Atlas zone. Further south and west is the domain of another variety, referred to as Tachelhit, occupying the Anti-Atlas mountain area and the plains from Sous, stretching from Agadir down to Ifni on the western coast, going as far east as the Draa. The High Atlas mountains somehow represent an intermediate area between the domains of central Moroccan Tamazight and Tachelhit.

In Algeria: the Tamazight-speaking zones in Algeria are less homogenous than in Morocco. Starting from the north, Kabylia represents one of the most important areas where the language is still in use. This is also the area where linguistic and cultural awareness has highly developed among the population. The Kabylia region contains four full administrative departments, Tizi-Ouzou, Bgayet (or Bejaia), Bouira and Boumerdes, although there are some parts in the two latter departments affected by the arabization process. Kabylia Tamazight is also in use in another department, Setif, which borders Bgayet, and more precisely in At Wartilen, Bougaa and the surrounding areas. It is also spoken in the Chenoua region, from Cherchel to Tipasa, located in another department (Tipasa) and, as one heads south, in Haraoua, Metmata and Bel Halima, situated west of Algiers.

The next important area where the Tamazight language is spoken and which we come across as we are heading southwest from Kabylia is another mountainous region, bordering Tunisia, called Aures (Batna and Khenchla). The variety spoken there is locally referred to as 'Tachawit'.

Other different Tamazight varieties are spoken in many other linguistic islands scattered in different areas such as the south Oranian region, called the Mountains of the Ksour, close to the Algero-Moroccan borders (Ain Ssefra, Figuig, Bechar, etc.) and Algerian Sahara (Mzab, Tougourt, Gourara and Touat and Tidikelt). Further south is the land of the Tuareg, a desert area which stretches into Mali and Niger.

Land of the Tuareg: The Tuareg are among the few Amazigh people to have kept using the name Tamazight, which as we said earlier is the original name of the language, although it is sometimes phonologically altered to Tamachaq, Tamajaq or Tamahaq depending on the area. Accordingly, the people refer to themselves as *Imuhagh / Imuchagh / Imujagh*, meaning 'Amazigh people' or as *Kel Tmajaq / Tmachaq / Tmajaq* meaning the people belonging to (speaking) the Tamazight language.

Among the areas where the Tuareg people live are the Hoggar and Tasili n Ajjer (in Algeria), and in the mountainous zones of Ayir (in Mali) and Ifoghas (in Niger). The land of the Tuareg also includes an important part in southern Libya, the zone stretching from Ghat to the vicinity of the Fezzan region, as well as some smaller zones in Mauritania and Senegal.

There are three more distinct zones where Tamazight is spoken in Libya besides that within the land of the Tuareg. Starting from the west, the zone called Ghadames, close to the southern Tunisian borders, is almost the continuation of the Ghat, yet with a different dialectical variety. The other zones in Libya include Nalout and Yefren in the Nefousa mountain area in the north, close to the southern border of Tunisia; Zouara on the north litoral; Sokna, and El Fokaha and Awdjila in the east.

In Tunisia, Tamazight is spoken in at least six villages located in the Ksour region, such as in Ghoumarassen, a village located about 300 km from Tunis, stretching south to Majora, Sened, Matmata, Zrawa, Taoujout, Tamezret, Chenini, Douirat and Foum Tatawin, as well as in the island of Djerba.

Unfortunately, the Tunisian government has always adopted strategies that end up forcing the inhabitants to leave these areas. As a result, Arabic-speaking investors take over the most touristic places, while the Amazigh move to already arabized areas.

In Egypt, the Oasis of Siwa is the only zone where Tamazight is spoken in Egypt. The contact between Egyptians and the Amazigh people goes as far back to antiquity as before 950 B.C. By that date, after the

Pharaoh Psousenness II had died, an Amazigh⁴ called Sheshonq I became the Pharaoh of Egypt and ruled from (945-924 B.C.). Sheshonq I, the founder of the 22nd dynasty established his capital city in Bubastis. His dynasty lasted 191 years before it came to an end shortly after the death of Sheshonq V (767-730). By that time, the Amazigh dynasty had many difficulties and Osorkon IV's rule, son of Sheshonq V who succeeded, was restricted to his home city Tanis and the dynasty's capital Bubastis. Three millenniums later, the Amazigh presence in Egypt is still maintained by the small Oasis of Siwa where the most eastern variety of the Tamazight language is still in use.

II. Politically Hostile Environment

In all the above mentioned countries, the Tamazight language is facing an extremely politically hostile environment. Mali and Niger are the only countries where the local varieties are recognized as 'national' and the governments have tentatively accepted to cooperate with UNESCO agencies to implement their programs of illiteracy elimination programs and help settle the nomadic population. However, the Nigerian and Malian governments have always remained hostile to any further political concession and recognition. Things are even worse in North African countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt) and Mauritania where the language and human rights of the Amazigh are even denied. The arabo-nationalist regimes have always made it clear that no other identity, language and culture other than Arab would be given any official recognition. A policy of Arabization has been whose main objective is to erase Tamazight language, identity and culture. Despite the superficial 'softening' of this policy in Algeria and Morocco by accepting Tamazight to be introduced in some universities, the Amazigh population is convinced that the objectives and the opinion of the arabo-islamist regimes have not changed at all.

Tamazight does not have the same chances of survival in all the above-mentioned countries, not because of the nature of the regimes, all of them being equally hostile to the Tamazight language, culture and identity, but because of their numbers. While the Tamazight-speaking population is relatively high in Morocco, Algeria, Mali, Niger and Libya, it is much less so in Tunisia and Egypt, where the regimes are just waiting for its extinction. In all these areas, Tamazight has miraculously survived orally in an extremely hostile political environment. Not until very recently did the Amazigh activists start to provide it a written status. The hope is, however, permitted everywhere since the identity and cultural awareness has grown to its utmost point.

III. Tamazight Morphology, Syntax and Phonology

In the present section we are going to provide some data regarding the lexicon, word order and phonetics of Tamazight.

III.1. Phonetics: Tamazight has 41 basic sounds, 3 vowels and 38 consonants.

Vowels: except from the Tuareg varieties which have developed some extra long and short vowels, Tamazight has only three (3) which are: i, u, a.

Schwa: noted as *e* but is not considered as a vowel.

Besides these vowels, almost all varieties have introduced the neutral vowel called schwa *ə*.

Consonants: the 36 consonants in use in tamazight are classified as follows:

Plosives	<i>b d m t k g q ħ</i> (for <i>ǧ</i>), <i>č</i> (for <i>ʃ</i>) <i>ɸ ɗ ɗ̣ ʒ ʒ̣ r</i> (pharangealized or 'emphatic' consonants)
Fricatives	<i>f s z ɛ x ɣ h</i> (for a laryngeal) , <i>ħ</i> (pharyngeal h)
Labialized	<i>k_w g_w q_w ɣ_w</i>
Nasal	<i>m n</i>
Laterals	<i>l</i>
Thrill	<i>r</i>
Semi-vowels	<i>y, w</i> (their status being between that of a vowel and that of a consonant)
Geminates	are noted by doubling the corresponding sound, <i>dd tt gg kk qq</i> but are not listed in the alphabet.

III. 2. Lexicon: the lexicon constitutes one of the important domains of dialectic variations among Tamazight dialects. Besides the basic Amazigh lexicon, there are a lot of loans from Arabic, French and Latin. In the Nigerian and Malian Tuareg varieties one can find loans from Hausa and Bambara respectively. Loan words are morphologically integrated in the Tamazight word structure.

III.3. Morphology: Unlike Germanic languages such as English, Tamazight is not a concatenative language. That is, the morphemes conveying grammatical information such as tense, gender, number and person, etc. do not constitute autonomous affixes. Such elements rather appear as amalgamated phonemes, vowels more often, within words.

III.4. Words: words are constituted with a consonantal root and thematic vowels. The consonantal root conveys the semantics (meaning) while the thematic vowels convey grammatical information. For instance, a root such as MyR conveys the meaning of aging, growing old, being elder, etc. It's combination with other elements will give the following derivations among many others:

amyar: elder (among the old),

ad yimɣur: he will grow up,

meqqr ⁵: he has(or is) a grown up,

ameqwrān: the elder (among the youth).

III.5. Gender: Tamazight morphology makes a distinction between feminine and masculine. *Masculine*: the masculine form corresponds to the neutral form of the word. This neutral form is interpreted as masculine⁶ by default, namely as opposed to the feminine form.

Feminine: the feminine form is indicated by a double t—t affix (the prefix t- and the suffix -t). The feminine equivalent of the word *amɣar* above is *tamɣart*. However, there are some words whose feminine form contains only the prefix t— such as *tarwa* (progenitors), *tasa* (liver).

III.6. Number: both singular and plural forms are used in Tamazight for both masculine and feminine. There are two ways of forming the plural, the regular and the irregular. The former is obtained by alternating the initial vowel of the word and by adding the suffix *-n* (*-in* for feminine) to the singular form. The latter is obtained by altering two vowels, the initial one and an other situated within the word. These two ways are exemplified below:

regular form	singular	plural
masculine	<i>amɣar</i> (elder)	<i>imɣarn</i> (elders)
feminine	<i>tamɣart</i> (elder)	<i>timɣarin</i> (elders)
irregular form	singular	plural
masculine	<i>asaru</i> ⁷	<i>isura</i>
feminine	<i>tasarut</i> (key)	<i>tisura</i> (keys)

III.7. Word Order: Tamazight is a basically Verb-Subject-Object language [see (a) below]. The SVO order is possible but it is not the basic order [see (b)]. Because of its rich inflexion, the subject may morphologically absent [see (c)].

- a. ***yeswa weqcic aman***
Drank the boy water (for the boy drank water)
- b. ***aqcic yeswa aman***
The boy drank water
- c. ***yeswa aman***
Drank water (for the boy drank water)

III.8. Pronouns: Tamazight has different series of pronouns. All the pronominal paradigms contain ten (10) different pronouns as given in the following table⁸:

	Independent ⁹	Affixes ¹⁰		
paradigm	subject	direct	indirect	possessive
1s.	Nek (or nekkini)	-yi	-yi	-iw
2s.m.	kečč (or keččini)	-k	-ak	-ik
2m.f.	kem (or kemmini)	-kem	-am	-im
3s.m.	netta	-it	-as	-is
3s.f.	nettat	-itt	-as	-is
1p.	nekwni	-ay (anay)	-a (anay)	-nney
2p.m.	kwenwi	-ikwen	-awen	-nwen
2p.f.	kwennemti	-ikwent	-akwent	-nkwent
3p.m.	nitni	-iten	-asen	-nsen
3p.f.	niteti (nitenti)	-itent	-asent	-nsent

III.9. Dialectic Variation: besides vocabulary differences which should be seen as originally reflecting lexical richness, the most important criterion of dialectic variation is phonological. The different varieties of Tamazight may be classified into three different groups: plosive, fricative and affricate dialects. The latter refers to the dialects that have kept the original plosive sounds as plosives (mainly Tachelhit or Tuareg varieties) while they have evolved into fricatives (Kabylia, central Moroccan Tamazight and Tachawit among many others) or even affricates (mainly those referred to as Zenete in the literature among of which Tumzabt and Mauritanian varieties) in the two latter.¹¹ The group that is characterized as affricate has phonologically gone a lot further. Some varieties such as Tarifit are difficult to classify as they have already moved from the fricative status but not enough to consider them as affricate. These differences do not reflect country boundaries but are older and prior to the constitution of the present different States. In Algeria for instance, all these three varieties coexist. These differences reflect the classification of inhabitant groups very often referred to as the Masmouda, Sanhadja and Zenete in the literature.

IV. The Alphabets in Use

Three different alphabets have unequally been used in Tamazight: Tifinagh, Latin and Arabic.

IV.1. Tifinagh, the Amazigh Script System: Tamazight language has never been promoted officially. Neither by the Amazigh kings (Massinissa, Juba, etc.) at the time they were ruling Tamazgha, nor intellectually by the numerous Amazigh philosophers such as St. Augustine, Tertullien, or Apulée to mention but a few

whose contribution to the western civilization is erroneously considered as Greek or Roman. Until very recently and with minor exceptions, Amazigh authors had always written in foreign languages but not in their own. Nevertheless, Tamazight did possess its own system of writing called Tifinagh, which is still in use even today among the Tuaregs. However, its use was restricted to tribute inscriptions on memorial stones or epitaph stones or epitaphs. The name Tifinagh is itself close to the way the feminine plural form of the word Phoenician is pronounced in Tamazight. However, this is not taken as proof that the script system itself derived from the Phoenician. Specialists refer to the old version of *Tifinagh* as *Libyc* or *Libyan* to distinguish them from the Tifinagh in use, for instance, among the Tuareg. The ancient inscriptions found all across North Africa, including the Canary Islands¹², clearly show that we are dealing with two distinct varieties of old Tifinagh. It is agreed that the North African eastern variety of Tifinagh had come under Phoenician influence, but not its western variety. This led some specialists to conclude that the western variety must have existed prior to the arrival of the Phoenicians in North Africa (Février, 1959). So far, the earliest attested inscription to have been dated goes back to 138 B.C. and was found in Thugga (today's Dougga, in Tunisia). The inscription is a tribute to the Amazigh king Missibsa. The system did not take vowel sounds into consideration; therefore only consonants were represented.

IV.2. Writing Tamazight Today: there has been many attempts to adapt the Tifinagh characters to modern usage, namely by introducing new symbols in order to take vowel sounds into consideration. Although the use of Tifinagh may be considered relatively widespread among Amazigh activists in North Africa, the bulk of the existing literature is written in a Latin script system. The latter has been widely adopted in scientific, literary, schools and university circles, both in North Africa and in Europe. It is also the system that was officially adopted in Mali and Niger and more recently by the HCA¹³ (High Agency for Amazighity), an official and state sponsored institution in Algeria. Besides Tifinagh, attempts were made to write the Tamazight language in Arabic characters. However, the use of the latter was mostly restricted to Muslim religious circles.

Notes

- [1.](#) We use the form Tamazight, feminine singular, to refer to the language as a noun and the form Amazigh, singular rather neutral than masculine, as an adjective.
 - [2.](#) For a very recent view of this question, see M. Hachid (2000).
 - [3.](#) The same name as Tamazight with the difference that the sounds /z/ and /gh/ have become /ch/ or /j/, and the sounds /gh/ + /t/ has become /q/.
 - [4.](#) Referred to as the Lebou in the ancient Egyptian literature. The word Lebou is only a variant of Libyan, another name under which the eastern Amazigh (today's Libyans) were designated.
 - [5.](#) The velar sound *qq* here of the gemination of the velar *γ*.
 - [6.](#) A default masculine as the morphology of the word does not, however, contain any morpheme marker referring to the masculine. See Achab (2001) for details.
 - [7.](#) Some kind of wooden support used for weaving.
 - [8.](#) The abbreviations read as follow: *s* for singular, *m* for masculine, *f* for feminine, *p* for plural.
 - [9.](#) Independent pronouns act as subjects.
 - [10.](#) As complement of verbs, nouns or prepositions.
 - [11.](#) These terms are technically used here. Plosives are sounds such as /t/ in the way it is pronounced in the English word 'teacher,' for instance. If it is spirantized, the sound evolves to a fricative, i.e. pronounced /th/ as in the English word 'theater'. The corresponding affricate sound is the way the 'ch' is pronounced in the English word 'church.'
 - [12.](#) More than 1120 were discovered, but not all deciphered. See Chabot (1940) and Février (1956).
 - [13.](#) Haut Commissariat à l'Amazighité.
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