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Mena B. Lafkioui

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## RECONSTRUCTING ORALITY ON AMAZIGH WEBSITES

Mena LAFKIOUI

Università di Milano-Bicocca – Ghent University

### *INTRODUCTION*

The “oral” character of the Amazigh (Berber) languages<sup>1</sup> is changing fast in North Africa and the Diaspora, mainly because of the increasing presence of literacy and electronic media (MEROLLA, 2002, 2005, see also her paper in this volume). Despite the precarious and marginal socio-political position of the Amazigh languages, an explosion of hybrid – in form and content – cultural expressions has been occurred in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Now more than ever, these languages function as a central source for constructing and reconstructing the Amazigh group identity, a process in which orality still plays a pivotal role. Oral poems and tales symbolically incarnate the traditional values and knowledge, carefully preserved and passed on for centuries in North Africa.

One of the most far-reaching and all-encompassing media, which generates new dimensions of Amazigh orality is the Internet. It allows individuals and groups to create new discourses and contexts: digital interactions (online interactions). Therefore, I will examine how Amazigh orality is reconstructed in digital interactions on Amazigh websites. I have

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<sup>1</sup> These Afro-Asiatic languages spoken in North Africa have no long literacy tradition. With exception of some important manuscripts in Tachelhit (Amazigh language of South Morocco; VAN DEN BOOGERT, 1997), most written texts are from the nineteenth and twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> However, the socio-political status of the Amazigh languages is changing in North Africa. They have recently acquired a national – but not “official” – status in Morocco (1994) and Algeria (2002). National institutions as the Algerian HCA (Haut Commissariat de la Culture Amazighe; 1995) and the Moroccan IRCAM (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe; 2001) were installed to maintain and develop the Amazigh cultural patrimony. The insertion of the Amazigh languages in the national education programme of these countries is an important outcome of this development, even though these languages are still considered constitutionally as “dialects” that serve to improve the proficiency of standard Arabic. This linguistic policy fits perfectly the linguistic-educational programmes for minority languages existing in the Diaspora, for instance, the LC2 programmes of the Netherlands.

chosen to examine Dutch-based Amazigh websites since they are most advanced and regularly updated. Moreover, these websites show a high level of creativity, related to the large presence of Amazigh people in the Netherlands who show a keen interest in the preservation and promotion of their cultural tradition and identity.

#### *DIGITAL RESOURCES AND AMAZIGH WEBSITES*

The Internet interactants visiting Dutch-based Amazigh websites use mainly Dutch and Tarifit (Amazigh language of North Morocco) for their digital interactions.<sup>3</sup> These are also the two basic languages in which these websites are assembled. Arabic (Moroccan or standard Arabic), English and French are generally employed if a written or multimodal text is inserted into the website in its original format. So, the interactants are constrained in their language choice for their digital interactions by their own language repertoire (linguistic competencies and interactive skills) as well as by the digital context in which the interactions occur. Digital context involves both the micro-context of a specific interaction instance in a precise timeframe (a chatforum interaction for example) and the macro-context of the transnational Amazigh website. Having access to these contexts and hence to their benefits and restrictions implies sharing the digital resources which the websites require; in this case, Dutch and Tarifit function as linguistic and interactive resources. Sharing these resources entails, however, the exclusion of others, such as Arabic and French, which may be motivated differently following the “argumentative” programme of the website containing its interactive objectives and functions. Tarifit primarily accomplishes the function of symbolic marker of the Amazigh group identity in opposition to various other local and trans-local group identities, for instance the Turkish identity (local “ethno-linguistic” identity), the Dutch identity (local national identity) and the Arabic-Islamic identity

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<sup>3</sup> In the Diaspora, national and local policies determine basically the sociolinguistic hierarchy of the languages used by the Amazigh speakers. Mother tongues as Tarifit (Amazigh language of more than 70% of North Africans in the Netherlands), with a non-official and minority status, cannot compete with the dominant languages: Dutch, the only official language in the Netherlands, and English, which is generally seen as the most international language. Moreover, no official education is given in the mother tongues in the Netherlands.

(trans-local international identity). A more pragmatic and instrumental function is assigned to Dutch as a digital resource, even though it may indicate a Dutch group identity in contrast with other national identities, such as the French identity on French-based Amazigh websites. Different interactive functions and social categories (values) are associated with different resources, whether interactively performed or unperformed in online or offline contexts. Structures and functions of digital resources are layered and stratified (HYMES, 1966, 1996; FAIRCLOUGH, 1992; BLOMMAERT, 2005) and consequently identities – considered as semiotic interactive processes – too. The Internet as an instrument of globalisation allows people to complete functions of linguistic resources trans-locally. Accordingly, it repositions these functions in the interactive (substantial and cognitive) space. The Amazigh languages, which in North Africa are officially still considered as “dialects” of “minorities” with a low socio-cultural status, may gain prestige through the trans-local transfer by the Internet. On the trans-local level, these languages may symbolise highly esteemed cultural values that may be entrenched in specific local contexts (Amazigh Diaspora in the Netherlands for instance) to create specific group identities. Moreover, the Internet may enhance their semiotic flexibility. One same sentence may be used in diverse online contexts consisting of different interactive positions from which various identities can be constructed.

#### *RECONSTRUCTING AMAZIGH ORAL NARRATION ON AMAZIGH WEBSITES*

The following example shows how a trans-local transfer of an oral text by means of the Internet deeply affects its very nature and structure and sometimes even its functions.

## Example 1:

Een paar dagen later kwam de vos weer langs bij de houtduif. 'Gooi één van je jongen naar beneden of ik eet jou, je jongen en de grond onder jou op', sprak hij wederom. 'Dat mocht je willen', sprak de houtduif uit de hoogte. 'Jij kunt toch niet bij me komen, daar zit ik veel te hoog voor.' 'Hmm,' zei de vos, 'hoe kom jij ineens aan die wijsheid?' 'Ha,' zei de ietwat overmoedige houtduif, 'wallah ma ath fathgegh 3emmi Bheleizh thayit yinnan (ik ben niet gek om 3emmi Bheleizh te verraden)'. 'Ok,' sprak de vos, 'dan zal ik dat ook maar niet van je vragen.'

'Tfoe, dus 3emmi Bheleizh gaat de wijze man uithangen', dacht de vos bij zichzelf. 'Ik zal hem met zijn raad.' Zoals altijd stond 3emmi Bheleizh aan de waterkant. Zachtjes sloop de vos dichterbij. '3emmi Bheleizh,' vroeg hij, 'wat doe je als de wind uit het oosten waait?' 'Dan stop ik mijn kop onder deze vleugel,' sprak 3emmi Bheleizh, terwijl hij het voor deed. 'En wat doe je als de wind uit het westen waait,' vroeg de vos weer. 'Dan stop ik mijn kop onder mijn andere vleugel,' antwoordde 3emmi Bheleizh hierop. 'Aha' zei de vos, 'en als de wind recht van voren komt?' 'Dan,' sprak 3emmi Bheleizh, 'stop ik mijn snavel in mijn borstveren.' Weer deed hij het voor.

Tmazight - DV on 11-09-2003 (20.42) on Tawiza  
(<http://www.tawiza.nl/content/awid.php?id=87&sid=1&andra=artikel>)

This example is an excerpt of a narrative written text that “retells”, mainly in Dutch, a traditional oral Amazigh folktale the author calls *Oom Ooievaar* (Dutch) or *3emmi Bheleizh* (Tarifit), which means “Uncle Stork”. Because it provides the clue to the narration, focus is placed on the utterance *wallah ma ath fathgegh 3emmi Bheleizh thayit yinnan* (By God, I shall not betray him, Uncle Stork, he told me!) by expressing it in Tarifit and thus code-switching it with the Dutch text. Besides the function of narrative contrast, an emblematic and expressive function is related to this utterance by means of its highly marked morphological-syntactic structure (expressive sermon) sustained by a well-defined expressive intonation, though not represented in the transcript. The expression *tfoe* is an interesting orality marker because it literally stands for the act of spitting, which is usually produced orally (verbally and non-verbally) in the Amazigh interactions. The parts in Dutch also have an oral character indicated mainly by their direct and simple style and the large presence of expressive and short locutions.

The originally oral narration, performed in Tarifit in specific offline contexts<sup>4</sup>, has been drastically reconstructed in order to meet the linguistic and interactive criteria which the website “Tawiza” demands.<sup>5</sup> Its digital recontextualisation (reframing) engages different dimensions (linguistic, social, cultural, and historical dimensions) that are all synchronised toward one signified feature: the digital folktale. Digital recontextualisation has changed the creative potential of the oral narration but not without altering the social and cultural categories associated with it. Compared with the original text, which is usually considered as normative, the digital version may be perceived as “non-literary”, “non-authentic”, “non-Amazigh”... in sum “wrong-footed”.<sup>6</sup>

#### *RELOCATING AMAZIGH ORAL POETRY ON AMAZIGH WEBSITES*

The next two examples show how Amazigh oral poetry is reconstructed on the website, especially when it comes to its performance context. The traditional setting involving verbal exchanges between the poet and a physically present audience at a single and unique time instance has been replaced by a digital setting with written text that can be read at any moment by any Internet interactant visiting the website.

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<sup>4</sup> Traditional Amazigh folktales are mostly narrated by women, usually of a certain age. They are only allowed to be performed at night because of the ancestral belief that the magical power of these narratives could inflict the audience with baldness if they were told by daylight. Even if this ancestral belief has lost its meaning to the younger Amazigh generations, it still has its function as an interaction framework, a specific ritualised setting in which ancient and modern narratives are located.

<sup>5</sup> The website operates here as a kind of “System of contextualisation conventions” as to speak in Gumperz’ terms (1992).

<sup>6</sup> See GOFFMAN (1974) for explanations about the concept of “footing”.

## Example 2:

Home >> Literatuur >> Poëzie >> *Tinit n umuni*

Aantal gelezen: 1422  
 ■■■■■■■■ (waardeer dit artikel!)

**Tinit n umuni**  
 Said Khottour

**Tinit n umuni**

Ma d izref x anegh, ad ninit(1) amuni,  
 Neccin nttarū war d nejji aseymi.  
 I mara nnigh awem ksit ayi d izri,  
 Nigh gget ayi d kenniw s yiji n yimi  
 Neccin ntemseksi jar anegh x urehmi  
 Maca āad war nari x iseqsiyen n unami.  
 D wakud ijja negh yarenni deg wmarī,  
 Urawen nnegh rettxen war nessin mayenzi.  
 Tuzzeyzewt n Tifswin mechār war teghmi  
 D arrimet inu yemmūn s rxezrat war teksi.  
 D kenniw yesran min yedjan war yedji.  
 Yesmun anegh bettū yejja anegh d amsebdī

(2001)

1-Tinitin n temghart

Said Khottour (2001) – DV on 11-09-2003 (20.42) on Tawiza  
 (<http://www.tawiza.nl/content/awid.php?id=435&sid=1&andra=artikel>)

The poem *Tinit n umuni* (Longing for togetherness) is presented under the sub-page “Poësie” (Poetry) of the hyperlink “Literatuur” (Literature) without any translation or further information<sup>7</sup>. Its author is an Amazigh

<sup>7</sup> With the exception of the footnote (1) that tries to explain the verbal structure *ad ninit* (we will long for...) by the Tarifit expression *Tinitin n temghart* (longing of a woman).

cultural activist who has left Morocco at a later age with a certain knowledge of and affection for the Tarifit language and culture.<sup>8</sup> The literary productions (poems, expressions, riddles, stories, etc.) of this kind of poets are generally composed in Tarifit and often followed by a translation in Dutch, as in the next example.

Example 3:

<p><b>Timeddukar</b></p> <p>Mmunent tmeddukar  Amechnaw tibecrar,  Fus deg wenedni,  Asuref dar s udar,  Iwident ghar tehwiwt.  Tenna as: raja ad nexzar  Ttwarid tzayart in?  D taziyzawt n wafar  Shes ad am oawdegh  Ar ami din nemsaggar</p> <p>Zzat i ma ad nessiwer  Nemsedjem d amezwar,  Wcigh as fus inu,  Isedjem xafi izeyyar.  Ucigh aked ca n deg  Di arrimet inu yegwar.  Ufigh ghars rhurnet,  A wetcma ca n rxir  Ucigh fus nnes  I yiri inu yenned  Yefsi ayi acewwaf,  Arrimet teckuked.</p>	<p><b>Vriendinnen</b></p> <p>De twee vriendinnen vergezelden elkaar,  Samen, één paar.  Hand in hand  De ene stap na de andere,  Tot zij bij de tuin aankwamen.  Zij zei tegen haar: wacht even,  Zie je die wingerd,  Met zijn blauwe bladeren?  Luister, ik zal je vertellen,  Toen wij elkaar daar ontmoeten.</p> <p>Voordat we met elkaar spraken,  Begroetten we elkaar.  Ik gaf hem mijn hand,  welke hij stevig pakte.  Ik voelde iets vreemds  Door mijn lichaam gaan.  Ik voelde me rustig,  Mijn zuster, wat een gevoel.  Ik voelde zijn hand  Om mijn nek.  Hij maakte mijn haar los,  er ging een rilling door mijn lijf.</p>
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<sup>8</sup> I have acquired this information through direct contact with the author.



<p>Yenna ayi: ammu yefsi Xir zi xemmi t tmuded! Huma ad ffghen redrur i zi tesirided. Ucigh fus nnedni Ghar wehsin yeswized.</p> <p>Yefsi ayi reqfar. Yenna ayi: war tteggwed! Yetghir ad as inigh: Ayaw! Min tegged? Ucigh aked rehmu Yessur aked tesmed, Ucigh aked uqemmmum nnes Ghar wenni ynu yiwed. D yemma tsekkar ayi, Tenna ayi: kkar ad teggwed!</p>	<p>Hij zei: Zo, los staat je beter dan gevlochten. De kruiden waarmee je je haar wast zullen opstijgen. Ik voelde de andere hand naar mijn buik reiken.</p> <p>Hij ontknoopte een knoop, en zei: niet bang zijn! Hij dacht dat ik zou zeggen: Pas op! Wat doe je? Ik voelde warmte en kou tegelijk. Ik voelde zijn mond Naar de mijne komen. Totdat mijn moeder mij wekte, En zei: Sta op en ga brood kneden!</p>
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Ziani is a well-known poet in the Rif-Amazigh cultural movement. He can be considered as one of the first generation of Rif poets in the Netherlands who tries to promote the Amazigh culture by poetry. During his relatively long stay in the Netherlands, he assisted and participated in the growth and diversification of the Tarifit literary production. In line with the customs of the poet's generation, he created and performed his poetry orally at first. It is with the introduction of the writing practice of oral poems (usually in Latin script) over the last twenty years that translation has gained interest among Rif-Amazigh poets. A considerable impulse for Tarifit written poetry and Dutch translation was given by the Dutch-based Amazigh websites that not only offer faster, cheaper, and new (multimedia) possibilities to (re)publish texts, but also appeal to a wider reading public. On these "minority" websites, literacy and translation occupy a crucial position for interactive and trans-local reasons.

#### *DIGITAL POETRY OR "MINORITY" VOICES*

In contrast with the first two poems (Example 2 and 3), the following example is composed for digital publication. The absence of the author's name and the publication date confirms that this poem did not appear as a written offline production first. Besides the fact that the author has chosen to publish his poetry on an Amazigh website, another strong identity

marker is the use of the Amazigh artistic pseudonym *Tilmasin*, which is written in one of the standard orthographic systems of Tarifit. Furthermore, the author calls for the recognition and preservation of the Rif-Amazigh identity, with a certain melancholy for the past and a great adoration for the Amazigh resistance combatants.

Example 4:

The screenshot shows a website page with a navigation menu on the left and a main content area. The navigation menu includes links for 'Volksverhalen', 'Literatuur in diverse uitingsvormen', 'Poëzie', 'Literaire persoonlijkheid v/d maand', 'Kranten en tijdschriften', 'Mudrus', and 'Boekbespreking'. The main content area is titled 'Tijd Tilmasin' and contains a poem in Dutch. The poem is titled 'TIJD' and consists of several lines of text. The footer of the page includes links for 'Home', 'Forum', 'Literatuur', 'Taal', 'Culinair', 'Muziek', 'Historie', 'Jeugd', 'Cultuur', and 'Overige'.

Tilmasin - DV on 02-07-2003 (23.49) on Tawiza  
(<http://www.tawiza.nl/content/awid.php?id=430&sid=1&andra=artikel>)

Even if the affective description of the resistance has not been specified historically in this poem, the reference to the resistance by Rif tribes against the Spanish and French colonisers at the beginning of the twentieth century is the most apparent one for those who are familiar with Rif's recent history (common knowledge as context). Nonetheless, diverse uptakes of this

poem (“Time”) are possible, thanks to the absence of time indications. The early Arabic-Islamic occupation of North Africa that has finished by supplanting several domains of the Amazigh cultures by its hegemonic nature and structure (cultural domination) may be an adequate uptake, because it would explain the utterance:

*Velen ontkennen de bezetting maar het is een vaststaand feit.*  
 Many deny the occupation but it is an established fact.

The Rif resistance war against Western occupation is a well-known and indisputable historical fact. Indeed, it still contributes to the national identity of Morocco, which needed to be reconstructed after the independence as an oppositional alternative to the Western colonist hegemony. So, the most probable occupation that the poet refers to is the Arabic-Islamic one, which has lost the social categorisation of “colonist” over time, because of the “amnesia” effects that its ideological hegemony exerts. The all-embracing and constraining character of the Arabic-Islamic ideology makes its presence indiscernible for insiders of the system (BARTHES, 1957). This digital poem may be a trans-local voice expressing disagreement about specific ideologies. However, it can be much more, because its digital trans-local contextualisation extends its potential uptakes unlimitedly.

*Niemand weet wat de toekomst ons zal brengen,  
 maar “ONZE RIF” die zullen wij nooit ontkennen!!*  
 No one knows what the future will bring,  
 but “OUR RIF” we will never deny it!!

The emphasised expression “ONZE RIF” (our Rif) of the excerpt above refers to a specific interactive space that engages both a physical space – the geographic area of the Rif, in which interactive practices can take place – and a cognitive space of historical, social, cultural and ideological beliefs. Because of its trans-local character, the digital context (Amazigh website Tawiza) not only foregrounds the cognitive aspects of this expression, but also favours the (re)construction of the Rif-Amazigh group identity. For reasons of repositioning the Self and the Other in the global interactive space, trans-localism (trans-nationalism) forms an important impulse for the reconstruction of group identities (VERTOVEC,

2001). So, the trans-local Rif-Amazigh identity has been relocated in this digital poem, which is embedded in a local Dutch context represented mainly by the use of the Dutch language on the Dutch-based Amazigh website Tawiza (APPADURAI, 1991, 1995; MEYROWITZ, 2005). The deictic marker *omɣe* (our) indicates that the author/interlocutor identifies with the orthodox Rif-Amazigh group identity, involving representations of language, culture and history. Furthermore, he strongly commits himself to his discourse by using this expression. In fact, the whole poem reveals a high degree of discursive commitment by the author.

#### *OTHER LITERARY GENRES ON AMAZIGH WEBSITES*

Most of the Amazigh websites offer under the hyperlink “Taal” (Language) “traditional” riddles and idiomatic expressions in Tarifit, written in Latin transcript and translated into Dutch (see samples of riddles in Example 5). Interestingly, the transfer of these literary genres from an oral local interactive context to a digital trans-local one has not affected their primary social and cultural function: the transmission and exchange of Amazigh cultural tradition. Part of this literary tradition is also the complex of symbolic imagery that these riddles evoke and require in order to be comprehended.

## Example 5:

The screenshot shows a website interface with a navigation menu on the left and a main content area on the right. The navigation menu includes: Raadsels, Spreekwoorden, Artikelen (Nederlands), Bibliografie, Schrift, Archief artikelen, Interviews (Engels), Interviews (Nederlands), Artikelen (Frans), Tarifiyt tot, Tamazight standaardtaal. The main content area is titled 'Home >> Taal >> Raadsels' and contains three riddles:

- šemmi Belbbuf/Berhuf yessens di/gi bara war yuf.**
  - Vertaling:** oom belbbuf/berhuf heeft de nacht doorgebracht in de regen, maar is niet nat geworden
  - Oplossing (tmz):** Atmun
  - Oplossing (nl):** Hooi + Hooistapel
  - Standaard tamazight:** šemmi Belbbuf/berhuf yessens di/gi berra ur yuf/ifezzeg.
  - door: Ilizi 11-10-2002 (19:16)
  - waardering: [Progress bar]
- Anu x wanu aman walu.**
  - Vertaling:** Put boven put maar er zit geen water in
  - Oplossing (tmz):** Aghanim
  - Oplossing (nl):** Riet
  - Standaard tamazight:** Anu x wanu aman walu.
  - door: Ilizi 08-10-2002 (21:18)
  - waardering: [Progress bar]
- Baw izará tatut.**
  - Vertaling:** één boon bezaaid een stukje aarde
  - Oplossing (tmz):** Refnar (Qenddir, Arb woord)
  - Oplossing (nl):** Lantaarn
  - Standaard tamazight:** Abaw izaréá tatut
  - door: Ilizi 11-10-2002 (19:09)
  - waardering: [Progress bar]

Extract of riddles on Tawiza

(<http://www.tawiza.nl/content/sectie.php?cid=48&secties=cat>)

Even though the Internet is most likely to enhance the shift from “orality” to “literacy”, it also allows the diversification of orality (multimodal orality) as a cultural and metacultural production and makes it accessible to the world. Poetry performances, interviews, movies, dance spectacles, among others, can be heard and viewed in their digital form by anyone connected to the Internet. Although the valorisation of certain Amazigh traditional literary genres and productions on the Dutch-based Amazigh websites may have a specific identity claiming and constructing purpose, their reproduction as cultural “heritage” corresponds to the hegemonic ideological discourses of cultural exclusivity and modernity (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT, 2004).

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