

# **The planning of Standardizing Amazigh language The Moroccan Experience**

Ahmed BOUKOUS  
IRCAM

## **Introduction**

In the literature on the issue of the standardization of Amazigh, planning is considered primarily in terms of corpus planning, while the latter can be apprehended in a relevant and meaningful fashion only in a systemic approach in which determining a strategic vision is a prerequisite to any technical action on the structure of the language (see Chaker, 2000; Boukous, 2012). This procedure could be explained by the fact that the question has long remained confined to the reserved area of the linguist even though it appeals directly to designers and strategists. Therefore, issues such as the following need clear answers:

- (i) What standard Language for Amazigh?
- (iv) What standard Script for Amazigh?

Examination of these issues is relevant because ensuing from it are practical steps to follow in order to adopt a coherent approach and a rational procedure in dealing with the planning of Amazigh Language.

## **1. Standardization of Amazigh Language**

Even if there is consensus among sociolinguists in stating that no linguistic community is homogeneous (see Labov, 1972), asking whether there is an Amazighophone language community before considering a policy for planning

the language is itself a prerequisite. The legitimacy of this question is at stake when one addresses the issue of Amazigh from an academic point of view using the tools of scientific analysis. But the fact of asking the question is not itself innocent from a political and ideological point of view. Indeed, the question might induce, instinctively, either a negative response or a positive one depending on the ideological representation of the speaker.

Indeed, even an academic answer to the question can only be nuanced and detailed because of the vagueness in the definition of the concept of “linguistic community” (see Dua,1981; Gumperz, 1982). A linguistic community is defined ideally as a social space for communication by means of a common language which is significantly much the same for all users and which ensures mutual intelligibility between the speakers and the groups. In this common political space lives a social body that identifies with this language. Applied to the particular situation of Amazigh, this general definition requires clarification. Indeed, Amazigh is spoken by groups that are secluded in autonomous nation-states in the area that covers North Africa and the Sahel countries, without counting the Amazighophone communities in the Diaspora. Linguistically, it is a linguistic entity fragmented into dialects and varieties between which the difference in morphonological, lexical and syntactic structures may be as important as to render opaque the intercommunication between speakers from remote areas. The situation is much the same between the geolects of the North, Center and South of Morocco, although the difference has started to decrease with the development of media using the Amazigh language, the expansion of the teaching of the language and the organization of cultural and artistic activities in different cultural and linguistic areas grouping actors from different dialects.

Should the review of the advantages and disadvantages of standardization and the recognition of the complexity of this

operation indefinitely postpone the decision on the codification and standardization of the Amazigh language? Certainly not. It only means that standardization is not a neutral technical exercise; it is eminently the result of strategic planning in which policy options and technical mastery, that required by the planner's profession, play a significant role. That is why both vision and action must be carefully considered and be subject to consultation and collaboration between institutional, political and social actors in the play of the social axiomatic, which presupposes that before making a decision, pure cooperative games, pure fighting games of and mixed games based on negotiation and arbitration be regulated.

The objective is clear, however: it is to turn Amazigh into a language that is written and oral, and a language with its references at the disposal of all speakers; a language that is functional, accessible and uniform, and that meets the needs of users in communication situations imposed by modern life. The task will not be easy, however. The major problem facing the planners is definitely that of variation. The variationist approach adopted by the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) seems realistic in that it takes into consideration the geolectal reality by treating in a first stage the *a priori* competing forms as forms pertaining to synonymy; hence, the choice of a standard form is left to the user. Then, in a second stage, a normalized form is favored, while leaving open the range of competing forms in order to raise the user's awareness to inherent variation in Amazigh as a whole. This approach is manifest in the textbook and in the reference grammar (Boukhris et al., 2008). It is undeniable that prudential rules must be observed to avoid creating a "linguistic monster" which is the result of an exclusive, *in vitro* work that may be rejected by users for many reasons. To avoid this pitfall, the standardization of Amazigh should be put into perspective considering it is a long-lasting process, taking advantage of a gradual and functional approach which makes it possible to develop variationist standards based on respecting the usual

pronunciation in the regions and adopting the most common vocabulary and the mostly used morphosyntactic forms in the geolects. In all cases, preference should be given to converging forms at the expense of singularities so as to avoid unnecessary borrowings and marked neologisms. In the process, consultation is required, be it internal consultation, especially among linguists, educationists and literary creators in order to avoid contradictions and inconsistencies, or consultation with the meso-environment and macro-environment, including confirmed speakers and experts in the field in terms of approach and methodology.

Any enterprise to standardize Amazigh presupposes clarifying the nature of the object to undergo planning. Indeed, when one speaks of “Amazigh”, three options are open first to the decision-maker, and then to the planner, namely the supranational standard, the national standard and the regional standard. The identification of the “Amazigh” object is important because it induces a political choice, a theoretical approach and an operational procedure that differ from one standard to another.

## **2. Standardization of Tifinagh Script**

Amazigh is essentially a language with an oral tradition. The range of oral uses includes situations of verbal interactions within the family, amongst peers, in social and professional life and in cultural production in the form of storytelling, poetry, singing, sayings, the riddle and so on. Thus, the intergenerational transmission of the experiences of Amazigh communities has taken place largely through oral tradition, which thus became the most important historical source. With the evolution of modern society, the central question is the following: how is efficient communication between individuals and groups to be ensured and how is the experience of the collective memory to be transmitted to future generations? This is not the slightest challenge facing the Amazigh community,

nor is it the least stake in the revitalization process that the Amazigh language and culture have launched.

The writing system of Amazigh is not recent. Indeed, the Amazighophone communities have since high antiquity used a specific writing, Lybic or Tifinagh, one of the first phonogrammatic writings of humanity. Similarly, these communities have borrowed the writing systems of the communities with which they have been in contact depending on historical circumstances. Indeed, there is a written Amazigh heritage composed of corpora of ancient inscriptions in Libyan-Berber (see Galand, 1966), a set of inscriptions in Tifinagh pieces of Amazigh Islamic literature written in Arabic characters and a set of texts, glossaries and grammars in Latin characters. In addition to this written tradition, which is after all limited, there have been a few writings in neo-Tifinagh since the 1960s that fall within the context of the revitalization of Amazigh.

It is, however, with the adoption of the Tifinagh alphabet and its codification by the IRCAM in Morocco since 2003 and its use in teaching-learning Amazigh and in the neo-literature that this language has started to become a written language. We are thus entering an important stage in the process of the revitalization of Amazigh because writing allows the language to have uses that are both oral and written, which broadens the range of communication situations in which speakers are in a position to use it. This benefit undeniably reinforces the value of Amazigh in the language market by making it modestly join the club of written languages.

The first stage of the approach adopted in the preparation of the standard Tifinagh writing system has thus been to conduct as exhaustive a review as possible of the variants of the Tifinagh alphabet as they have been or are still in use in the Amazigh domain. The problem to address is to sort out all the attested notations because the Tifinagh spelling went

through several variants the most important of which being: proto-Tifinagh or Libyc, the current Touareg Tifinagh and neo-Tifinagh.

- (i) Proto-Tifinagh includes Eastern, Western, and Saharan variants; these have the following common properties: they are based on consonants and semi-consonants, with the vowels being present only in word final position, and the shape of the letters shows more similarities than differences.
- (ii) The current Touareg Tifinagh also includes some variants, the profound unity of the writing system of which is evident: the letters are exclusively consonantal or semi-consonantal, so vowels are absent, and most letters have an identical shape.
- (iii) Neo-Tifinagh includes some variants whose unity is even more pronounced than that of other systems: they mark consonants, semi-consonants and vowels; they borrowed their signs mostly from proto-Tifinagh and from the Twareg alphabet; the shape of some signs has been altered; and some signs have been added, namely those representing affricates, emphatics, gemination and labio-velarization.

To sum up, Libyc, which is the oldest form of this writing, is essentially consonantal; the Twareg Tifinagh has marked an evolution with respect to Libyc by noting the vowels a, i, and u and the semi-consonants y and w; and, finally, neo-Tifinagh is characterized by a concern for searching for the unity of shapes coupled with a technical concern.

Given the variety of notations, and in order to satisfy the social needs of the users of Amazigh, the adoption of an efficient, standard spelling becomes a necessity in a context that

is relatively favorable for the promotion of Amazigh. This adoption must of course be done according to a rational and coherent procedure.

The adoption of the Tifinagh alphabet and its use as the official spelling in education have, objectively, constituted a challenge to the extent that this alphabet had virtually been ignored not only by the population but also by the scientific community. Under the missions assigned to the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture by the legislator, particularly in Article 3rd of the *Dahir* related to the creation and organization of this institution, the task of standardizing the spelling of Amazigh has been successfully carried out by the researchers in linguistics and the computer engineers belonging to the institution. This operation represents a major contribution in the context of the planning of the Amazigh language with a view of including it in the educational system and media, as well as in national, regional and local cultural life, and in public life in general.

The approach adopted in the preparation of the standard Tifinagh alphabet satisfies the needs required by the planning of this alphabet in order to adapt it to the phonological system of standard Moroccan Amazigh. That is the reason why it was necessary to make amendments which have changed the form of some signs borrowed from the notation of neo- Tifinagh.

### **2.3 Standard Tifinagh**

The tfinagh spelling has 33 graphemes, 27 of which are consonants, 2 semi-consonants and 4 vowels (see Table below):

**Tifinagh table**

<b>Tifinagh</b>	<b>Latine</b>	<b>Examples</b>	<b>Glose</b>
◌	a	◌Λ◌◌	mountain

⊖	b	◦⊖⊖⊖	path
⊗	g	◦⊗⊖◦	horse
⊗ <sup>w</sup>	g <sup>w</sup>	◦⊗⊗ <sup>w</sup> ⊗ <sup>w</sup> ◦⊗	Red
∧	d	◦∧∧∧	knee
E	ḍ	◦E◦Q	foot
⊖	e	⊖⊖⊖⊖⊖	To forget
∧	f	◦∧∧∧	hand
∩	k	∩Q◦E	Four
∩ <sup>w</sup>	k <sup>w</sup>	◦∩∩∩∩ <sup>w</sup> ∩	friend
⊖	h	◦⊖∧∧	clothe
∧	ḥ	◦∧∧∧∧	dance
∩	ε	◦∩⊖∩	blanket
⊗	x	⊖⊗⊗⊖	sheep
∩	q	◦∩◦⊖	bag
∩	i	∩∩∩	mouth
I	j	◦II∩∩	flower
∩	l	◦∩∩∩∩	sand
∩	m	◦∩∩	water
∩	n	∩∩∩∩	weat
⊖	u	⊖∧∩	face
⊖	r	⊖⊖◦	
Q	ʀ	⊖⊖⊖Q	
⊗	γ	◦⊗Q∩	
⊖	s	∩∩∩	
⊖	ʂ	⊖⊖⊖⊖	
∩	c	◦∩∩∩∩	
⊖	t	⊖⊖⊖⊖	
E	ṭ	E∩EE	
∩	w	◦∩∩∩	
∩	y	◦∩∩∩∩	
⊗	z	◦∩◦⊗∩	
⊗	z	∩∩∩	

In establishing the standard alphabet, two categories of graphemes are thus considered: graphemes that are retained without modification and graphemes that have undergone

planning. The evaluation of the latter category in terms of technical and educational costs has helped identify the advantages and limitations of this spelling.

The following table lists the Tifinagh-Ircam graphemes with their corresponding Arabic and Latin letters:

## ***2.4 International approval***

The Tifinagh Alphabet, developed by the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM), is recognized internationally by relevant institutions under the name Unicode Tifinagh-IRCAM. In fact, on Friday, 25 June, 2004, the Tifinagh spelling was officially recognized as part of the Basic Multilingual Plane by the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) represented in Morocco by the Department of Moroccan Industrial Standardization (Service de Normalisation Industrielle Marocaine (SNIMA)) of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Telecommunications. The information presented here is taken from the ISO/IEC JTC1/SC2/WG2 N2739 document. The international approval of Tifinagh has a considerable importance as a prerequisite for taking advantage of new information and communication technologies.

With the approval of Tifinagh, Amazigh enters, albeit modestly, the era of internationalization of processing and exchanging information and electronic publishing while, like the spelling systems from around the world, abiding by the necessity to establish standards for coding. This is precisely the object of the Unicode norm, a computer standard developed by the Unicode Consortium whose aim it is to give a unique digital identifier, in a unified way, to any character in any language writing system regardless of the computer platform or software. Specialists (see Andries, 2008) point out that in order that the letter codes can be read, they must be associated with fonts that produce visual images, or glyphs,

corresponding to the codes. The letter is thus an abstract unit of textual information, while the glyph is the graphical form used for the presentation of the letter.

The coding problem has intensified since the advent of the Internet and the globalization of information sharing in the form of text documents. The ideal is to ensure that a document containing information can be treated on a system using a set of Western letters, for example, as easily as it can on another system that uses a different set such as the Eastern system. For this, several codes have been implemented but are not universal, as is the case with ASCII or ISO-2022 codes, and so on.

Today, Unicode has become the standard for text coding in most languages and communication protocols. It is recognized by most computer professionals to be a universal method for coding the letters of any language on any platform that recognizes it. The principle of the Unicode project is to develop a code which is *universal* in order to code all letters; *efficient* and easy to analyze and process; *uniform* and coded on a fixed number of bits; and *non-ambiguous*, for which any value corresponds to a single, unique letter.

The coding of Tifinagh-IRCAM through the Unicode system is a unique opportunity which presents itself to Amazigh and which will have important consequences for its influence. The proposal to add the Tifinagh writing system to the Basic Multilingual Plane was accepted unanimously as of Amendment 1 by delegations from the various countries participating in the workings that took place from 21 to 25 June in Toronto (Canada). Acceptance by ISO (ISO 10646:2003) in the current amendment and not in Amendment 2 saves Amazigh one year in the codification of the Tifinagh letters. All the countries present during the workings have highlighted the excellent technical quality of the proposal initiated by the IRCAM. This is an exceptional fact that should be highlighted. On 25 June 2004, the Tifinagh writing (55 Tifinagh letters

including the 33 letters of the official Tifinagh alphabet of Morocco developed by IRCAM) was officially recognized as part of the “Basic Multilingual Plane” by the International Standardization Organization (ISO) represented in Morocco by the Department of Moroccan Industrial Standardization-Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Telecommunications (SNIMA).

With the codification of the Tifinagh writing, Amazigh may thus benefit from the standardization of electronic products and the allocation of a computer code (directory, name and number) to the Tifinagh letters, thereby ensuring the exchange of electronic documents without information loss. The Tifinagh writing can thus be integrated into software developed by large companies specialized in the production of software. This will facilitate its use especially at the level of the Internet and word processing. However, this is not the only impact of this coding; at the symbolic level, it also means the international recognition of Tifinagh as a scriptural heritage of the world.

The convincing achievement of IRCAM in terms of elaborating the project of codifying the Tifinagh writing system has thus been recognized by appropriate international bodies. This success will allow Amazigh to make a qualitative leap through the implementation of the policy of promotion and valorization that it is enjoying. These achievements in the realization of glyphs do not make believe, however, that Amazigh has totally taken the most prestigious route into digital technology: its presence on the Net remains a wish and the software remains the prerogative of the major languages. It must be admitted that the weight of Amazigh is more than negligible in the new ICT market.

#### ***4.2 Tifinagh Implementation Process***

The use of standard Tifinagh in the teaching/learning of Amazigh, strengthened by an adequate training of the teachers, offers the following advantages:

- (i) The saturation of the phonological system of standard Amazigh has it that to every phoneme corresponds a specific Tifinagh grapheme. Conversely, the adoption of the Arabic alphabet requires the addition of diacritics to certain graphemes to render the specificities of the Amazigh sounds, such as the emphatic sounds ẓ and ṛ, and schwa, for which the Arabic alphabet has no corresponding letters. In addition, there is the thorny problem of vowels, which are not transcribed in Arabic and whose use would considerably encumber the text in Amazigh. The adoption of the Latin alphabet would pose the same number of problems.
- (ii) The motivation engendered by the initiation to a writing system with a symbolic value can act as a facilitator in the teaching-learning of Tifinagh. Indeed, in the social representation of the Amazighophone community, Tifinagh is considered part of the national cultural heritage and, thereby, acquires historical legitimacy.
- (iii) The correspondence one language/one spelling is a structuring element that creates a form of security in the minds of learners. Thus, the learner identifies the Arabic language with its alphabet, foreign languages with the Latin alphabet and the Amazigh language with Tifinagh. Contrary to what some might think, classroom observation and pedagogical reports by teachers and trainers indicate that learning at a certain age three distinct alphabets, Arabic, Latin and Tifinagh, does not seem to create difficulties or disruptions among the learners.
- (iv) The absence of spelling and phonetic transfers that could result from the use of a spelling other than Tifinagh. For example, the use of Arabic script can conduct the learner to pronounce the vowels as long

ones. Such a practice could lead to fossilized errors penalizing the learner.

The presence of Tifinagh in the social field is reinforced by the recent experience of teaching Amazigh and using it in teaching materials and educational multimedia and in collections of literary writing, and to a small extent in inscriptions on some signs and information signs.

The choice of a standard writing and spelling was a prerequisite for the integration of Amazigh in school. Indeed, as of its opening in 2002, IRCAM considered the resolution of the issue of the writing and spelling system a central task to facilitate the teaching of Amazigh. Thus, Tifinagh was adopted in February 2003 after a series of studies on different graphic notations of Amazigh, taking into consideration their strengths and weaknesses. In September 2003, the first schools hosted Amazigh and the Tifinagh script for the first time in the history of the Moroccan educational system.

This certainly is an unprecedented event, but it is also a real challenge. The first textbook for oral activities was designed; others followed: the student's textbook and the teacher's guide; training sessions were organized for teachers, inspectors and the trainers of training centers. What remains is to evaluate this experience on the basis of an evenhanded diagnosis in order to temper both euphoric effusions and the apprehensions and skepticism.

Tifinagh inscriptions exist in the rock carvings of some archaeological sites in Morocco. Symbols recalling the letters of Tifinagh are the mark of the Amazigh art; they are inscribed on carpets, jewelry, the doors of collective attics and the painted ceilings of rich country homes, on pottery and on the buildings of southeast Morocco Kasbahs. It is a heritage that unquestionably testifies to the historicity of Tifinagh and that runs counter to those who believe that Tifinagh is an invention

or a recent creation.

In addition to this ancient tradition, another more recent tradition is being established in the neo-literature milieu, among poets, short story writers, novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters. Tifinagh is slowly becoming the preferred tool ensuring the passage of the Amazigh literary production from orality to writing.

The Moroccan society is just discovering the Tifinagh writing. The rural communities who live in the places where the symbolic Tifinagh is illustrated do not have a creative and lively knowledge of this writing. Reasoning in terms of unconscious collective memory, one can say that its re-appropriation may be experienced especially on the mode of nostalgia. It is interesting to observe that after the time of the consensus around the Royal approval of Tifinagh, voices arise to criticize the choice of Tifinagh, some of which argue in the name of modernity that it is outdated, while others argue in the name of religion that it is illegitimate. This means that Tifinagh is a matter of social and political debate. Therefore, to be credible and sustainable, the emerging practice of Tifinagh needs to be consolidated by institutional support and backed by a socio-cultural movement that identifies with it.

Ultimately, the review of the writing systems that were candidates to serve as the writing system of Amazigh, namely Tifinagh, Arabic and Latin, shows that, to varying degrees, all three need planning measures. These measures generate a cost that is at the same time social, cultural, technical and educational. Therefore, a recommendation is in order: the option for a spelling, whatsoever it is, can be neither exclusive nor absolute. Indeed, in language planning, the implementation phase of the standard product requires an evolutionary approach characterized by a flexibility which is imposed by the requirements of monitoring, testing and regulation, particularly in the area of the teaching-learning of the language.

The approach adopted by the designers of standard Tifinagh took advantage of the scientific knowledge available in modern linguistics applied to Amazigh in terms of coding the letters and elaborating the corresponding glyphs. However, given the nature of the challenges implied by the choice of a spelling system, extra-scientific considerations invested by competing legitimacies clearly come into play; yet, it seems that what is ultimately decisive in the passage of Amazigh from orality to scripturality via Tifinagh is an effective social and institutional support for the process of revitalization.

### **3. Concluding considerations**

Throughout history, Amazigh underwent the contact of the conquering languages, namely Latin, Arabic, Spanish and French. Thus, it saw its space shrink, its speaking mass decrease, its homogeneity alter, its structures deteriorate and its socio-cultural functions decline. Amazigh has, therefore, been in a situation of deep precariousness. The factors explaining this situation are known, the most important of which are:

- (i) The fact that it had no status in the Constitution until recently prevents it from receiving effective legal protection.
- (ii) The weak institutional presence makes it fragile in the sectors that provide power, including the sectors of the economy, education and media.
- (iii) Demographic reflux and linguistic and cultural assimilation in the context of migration contribute to reducing its social base.
- (iv) The weakness, if not the deficiency, of aware determination leads some fringes of the community, not to consider the Amazigh language and culture central identity values and thus to ensure only a weak intergenerational transmission of the language and the culture.

This analysis above reveals the urgent need for a strategic planning based on a long-term, systemic view that is able to ensure conditions for the revitalization of Amazigh. This amounts to:

- (i) Determining the nature and place of the policy for promoting Amazigh as part of the strategy of the State;
- (ii) Evaluating the symbolic multidimensional issues locally and globally;
- (iii) Defining the political status and the sociolinguistic functions of Amazigh.;
- (iv) Controlling the process of implementing the vision in terms of planning the language structures and establishing the language and culture in its social and institutional environment;
- (v) Deploying the adequate human, financial and material resources;
- (vi) Monitoring and evaluating the whole process.

In this perspective, it seems clear that strategic thinking is underway and that measures are being executed, especially in the areas of studies, research, education and media. The effects of this policy are beginning to yield results in terms of the revitalization of the language by broadening its socializing proximity, deepening awareness, institutional investment and the benefit of ideological legitimacy. Efforts should, however, be agreed on by the community, society and the State in terms of synergistic collaboration, the application of the principle of subsidiarity in the globalized governance and management of the process of revitalizing Amazigh in its entirety.

It is within this systemic approach that the process of planning the status and corpus of Amazigh is couched, with its specific issue, its variationist approach and its progressive procedure with respect to determining the standard and the

procedures for standardization. This treatment, which may seem technicist is nonetheless essential for the coherence of the project of recognizing the linguistic and cultural diversity of Morocco and the effectiveness of its implementation. Ultimately, the issue to manage is that related to the conflicting relationship between social determinism, which acts as a force for assimilation, and community self-determination, which acts as a counterweight to this force.

## References

- Andries, P. (2008). *Unicode 5.0 Codage des caractères et internationalisation des logiciels et des documents*. Paris, Dunod.
- Boukhris, F ; A. Boumalk ; oujahid E. et H. Souifi (2008). *Grammaire nouvelle de l'amazighe*. Rabat, Publications de l'IRCAM.
- Boukous, A. (2012). *Revitalisation de l'amazighe. Enjeux et stratégies*. Rabat, de l'IRCAM.
- Chaker, S. (2000). Orientations générales pour l'aménagement de la langue berbère: urgence et réalisme. *Imazighen-Assa*, 5-6.
- Dua Hans R. (1981). Dimensions of Speech Community. In *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 32, 85-119.
- Gumperz, J. (1982). Types of Linguistic Communities. In *Anthropological Linguistics* 34,191-212.
- Galand, L. (1966) *Inscriptions Libyques*. In *Inscriptions Antiques du Maroc*. Paris: Editions du CNRS.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. University of Pennsylvania Press.