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Darija and the global multilingual digital landscape

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Abstract: The present study investigates how Darija, within a complex multilingual and digital context, is reshaping the roles of traditionally dominant languages like Standard Arabic and French. It highlights a shift towards a more symmetrical sociolinguistic system, where local interactions redefine linguistic functions. The research also explores how Darija interacts with the Tamazight languages in the global digital sphere, addressing conflicts and competitions. It delves further into the concept of 'Darijation', an unintended result of North African language policies, and reveals that Darija is increasingly displacing other languages, creating a new linguistic landscape.

Keywords: Darija, Darijation, Tamazight, multilingualism, digitalisation, globalisation, conventionalised heteroglossia, intertextuality

1. Darija from an "integrating interactional perspective"

In this study, I examine how Darija, within its complex multilingual, globalised, and digital landscape, reframes and reshapes the roles of dominant languages like Standard Arabic and French. Traditionally, these languages have held superior and normative sociolinguistic positions. However, recently, Darija is increasingly facilitating a shift towards a more symmetric interactional system where sociolinguistic functions are locally negotiated and assessed (Lafkioui 2013, 2019, 2021, 2024). The study also focuses on how Darija-interactants establish language and cultural norms and accommodations in relation to the Tamazight languages and their local varieties within the global digital environment, examining the conflicts and competitions among them. Accordingly, the study inquires further into the concept of "Darijation" (Lafkioui 2024), an unintended byproduct of North African language policies driven by "Institutional Arabisation". This concept is pivotal for comprehending the political and sociocultural dynamics of contemporary North Africa and its diaspora. The findings reveal that Darija is encroaching upon and supplanting

the functions and linguistic practices of other languages, even those that have been traditionally dominant, leading to the emergence of a new linguistic landscape, as will be shown in the subsequent sections.

The study adopts an interactional sociolinguistic approach to meticulously look at the complex interplay between language, identity, and power (Goffman 1981; Gumperz 1982; Lafkioui 2019, 2024), particularly in the context of globalisation. At the heart of this approach is the focus on "interactants" – the individuals engaged in social interactions – rather than viewing language as a detached abstract concept. Interactants collaboratively generate and regenerate meaning, thereby producing and perpetuating cultural values, identities, and ethnicities.

Significantly, this study considers both linguistic and extralinguistic features of interactions, which are intertwined with historical, social, cultural, and political contexts. This "integrating interactional paradigm" (Lafkioui 2013, 2024) incorporates concepts from linguistic ethnography and anthropology, focusing on the dynamics of power and its manifestation through language, whether in practice or in theory (Blommaert 2010; Bourdieu 1982; Fairclough 1989; Gal 2006). Consequently, Lafkioui's "integrating interactional paradigm" emphasises the necessity of combining linguistic and extralinguistic perspectives to fully comprehend human interaction and, by extension, human nature. The linguistic perspective encompasses the study of various dimensions – from prosody to syntax, semantics, and pragmatics – and pertains to all levels of interaction. These range from the minimal unit, the speech act, to the maximal unit, the interaction paragraph, whose structure is tied to the extralinguistic context, often conveyed through prosody.

This paradigm has informed my research on language and culture from the outset, shaped by extensive fieldwork in North Africa and Europe since the mid-1990s. The data and analyses presented in this study were gathered from various offline and online settings, resulting in a substantial ecological, multilingual, and multimodal corpus from Africa and Europe.

The structure of the study is as follows: Section 2 addresses Darija's position within North Africa's landscape of layered and stratified multilingualism. Section 3 focuses on the concept of "Darijation" and its role and impact within this linguistic landscape. Section 4 discusses recent developments that have led to the perception and representation of Darija as part of the Tamazight heritage. Section 5 examines how Darija is framed and reframed in global and digital contexts. The study concludes by presenting the overall findings.

2. Darija within North Africa's "layered and stratified multilingualism"

North Africa today presents an intricate sociolinguistic landscape marked by what has been termed "layered and stratified multilingualism" (Lafkioui 2008, 2013, 2024) while referring to the setting in which "the various languages in use do not hold equal sociolinguistic status nor 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" (Lafkioui 2024: 20-21).

In this diversified sociolinguistic landscape, which reflects the complex historical, social, and political interactions of North Africa, the Tamazight languages (Afroasiatic) stand out as the only endogenic languages (Section 2.1) alongside numerous exogenic ones. Darija also stands out as it is an "endogenised" contact language which has Tamazight as one of its main components, as will be explained in Section 2.2.

Among the various languages attested in North Africa, there are sub-Saharan African languages such as Songhay (Nilo-Saharan), Fula and Wolof (Niger-Congo), and Hausa (Afroasiatic), which are regularly used as contact languages among the Zenaga and Tuareg Amazigh peoples in the Sahara and northern Sahel regions.

Arabic, in its classical, standard, and vernacular forms (Semitic, Afroasiatic), was introduced to predominantly Tamazight-speaking North Africa through Islamic conquests mainly starting from the 7th century. These conquests initiated the process of Arabisation, which gained significant impetus many centuries later, particularly following independence from Western colonial powers in the 20th century when the newly established nation-states adopted Arabisation policies as a chief precept, coined "Institutional Arabisation" in Lafkioui (2013, 2024). Institutional Arabisation operates as a cyclical process, closely aligned with the shifting dynamics of local and global hegemonic conjunctures. It is primarily driven by nationalist governance policies that impose language changes from the top down and that "has persistently aimed at establishing Standard Arabic as the national language, often invoking Islam as justification for this endeavour" (Lafkioui 2024: 19). The Institutional Arabisation policy is influenced by both French centralist Jacobinism and Nasserist and Baathist pan-Arabism (i.e., *ʿurūba*), blending elements from both ideologies to promote linguistic and cultural uniformity.

Among the diverse Indo-European languages introduced to North Africa primarily through Western colonisation, French and Spanish still play significant roles in the region's power dynamics. Additionally, English functions prominently as the international lingua franca.

2.1. Tamazight

Tamazight, the endogenic language family of North Africa, comprises around forty distinct languages and their local varieties, all of which form a specific branch of the Afroasiatic phylum. These languages are only mutually intelligible among neighbouring varieties or those within the same subgroup or type. Otherwise, effective communication typically requires formal education or extensive exposure to the different languages. Even within a single Tamazight language, there can be significant variations that hinder mutual understanding among speakers of different varieties.

Overall, the Tamazight languages in North Africa form a linguistic continuum, with no clear-cut boundaries separating one language from another. Instead, there is a gradual transition from one language to the next, reflecting the intricate and overlapping nature of this language family (Lafkioui 2018, 2024).

Tamazight encompasses ancient language forms, historically known as Libyan or Numidian, which date back to the 5th-10th century BCE. These early forms evolved into

both ancient and modern Tifinagh scripts. Tifinagh remains the endogenic writing system for the Amazigh peoples and is still actively used by the Tuaregs, who primarily live in the Sahara and northern Sahel regions, collectively also known as southern Tamazgha. Over time, Tifinagh, particularly its Neo-Tifinagh version, has been adapted from its original form. In northern Tamazgha, especially Morocco, Neo-Tifinagh saw a development after Tamazight was incorporated into the official education system in 2003.

Despite the increasing use of Neo-Tifinagh and the recent official recognition of Tamazight alongside Standard Arabic in Morocco and Algeria, the adoption process remains inconsistent and imprecise. Both countries are currently working on developing a standardised form of Tamazight. In Morocco, the official standardisation uses the Tifinagh script, while in Algeria, it employs the Latin script. These efforts aim to unify the various Tamazight languages at the national level. However, these standardisation initiatives often face significant resistance from Tamazight-practicing communities. The primary concerns stem from the subpar outcomes of these initiatives and their limited practical impact on key areas such as education and administrative functions.

A critical issue is that the standardisation process fails to adequately consider the regional and local variations of the Tamazight languages, which reflect significant demographic, sociocultural, and historical diversity. This oversight undermines the effectiveness and acceptance of the standardised forms among native speakers.

Moreover, the implementation of the Tamazight language project has experienced significant delays, especially within the education sector. In Morocco, for instance, the initiative to expand Tamazight education, which began in 2003, has seen sluggish progress. Originally, there was a promise that by 2010, Tamazight would be taught at all educational levels – from primary schools to universities – throughout the country, including in predominantly Darija-speaking regions. However, the current state of Tamazight education in Morocco fails to deliver. It is confined to the primary grades and suffers from inadequate quality. This deficit is partly due to a shortage of qualified teaching staff and insufficient appropriate pedagogical materials. As a result, the promise of comprehensive Tamazight education at all levels is far from being fulfilled.

Instead, the current situation highlights how Tamazight and its activism have been heavily instrumentalised since its recognition as a "national" and later "official" language in Algeria and Morocco starting in the 1990s. Despite the formal acknowledgment, the practical implementation and genuine support for Tamazight remain inconsistent, mostly leveraged for political and economic purposes than for true linguistic and cultural preservation and development.

One effect of this instrumentalisation is the noticeable decline in the use of Tamazight attested across North Africa and its diaspora, even in regions with substantial Tamazight-speaking populations, such as Southern Morocco where Tashelhit is prominent. Darija is progressively replacing Tamazight across all social classes. Additionally, Standard Arabic is displacing French and Spanish, particularly among the educated middle class. These trends underscore the challenges faced by Tamazight-interactants in maintaining their linguistic and cultural heritage amidst broader linguistic shifts and societal changes in the region.

Consequently, those Imazighen who have resisted the instrumentalisation of Tamazight, often referred to as *ḫubza* ('loaf of bread' in Darija), meaning clientelism, continue to

pursue their struggle for language, cultural, and identity rights through non-governmental networks. Amidst these trials, the vigorous advocacy by numerous non-governmental organisations and platforms has significantly elevated the social and political prominence of Tamazight languages and cultures in recent years. This renaissance is further bolstered by a remarkable surge in scholarly inquiry and cultural output dedicated to the Tamazight linguistic and cultural legacy. Notably, digital media contributed to the formation and expansion of "Amazighness" or *Tamuzgha*, the "trans-local (pan-)Amazigh collective identity", in which both Tamazight and Tifinagh serve as icons (Lafkioui 2008, 2013, 2024).

2.2. Darija

Darija or *Darğa* (or variants) 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 (Lafkioui 2024: 21).

The use of Darija is almost unavoidable when attempting to spontaneously speak (Modern) Standard Arabic, or *al-Fuṣḥā*, in North Africa. Switching between Standard Arabic and Darija has become so routine that a kind of "intermediate language variety" quickly emerged following the introduction of Standard Arabic as the official language of the newly formed nation-states post-independence. This hybrid form is now frequently employed in formal and semi-formal educated settings. While it is plausible to categorise this "intermediate" variety of Darija as a distinct form, akin to what Youssi (1995) refers to as "Middle Moroccan Arabic", it remains debatable whether this is a language in its own right (as in e.g., Ennaji 2001; al-Midlāwī 2019; Youssi 1995) or rather a register or set of registers of Darija – such as an "educated register" – with its own genres and styles, like an "artistic style", for instance.

In recent years, several initiatives have emerged attempting to standardise Darija or engage in related debates, particularly in the realm of orthography (e.g., Aguadé 2006; Caubet 2017; Durand 2004; Hoogland 2014; Michalski 2019; al-Midlāwī 2019; Miller 2017; Moscoso 2009; Moustaoui Srhir 2016). These standardisation efforts, while unofficial – since Darija lacks any official status in North Africa – often take this "intermediate" variety of Darija as a starting point, typically considering Standard Arabic as a reference (e.g., al-Midlāwī 2019; Youssi 1995). This approach is evident even in the

way "Darija" is written, often with a long vowel *ā* as in *Dārija* or *Dāriğa*, despite the absence of long vowels in Darija, a trait it shares with Tamazight. This trend is especially prevalent in academic circles, whose suggestions are increasingly picked up by stakeholders in the political and business sectors aiming to instrumentalise Darija, as will be discussed in Section 3. These stakeholders usually have no genuine interest in Darija as a language or its practice as cultural capital; rather, they view it as a blemish, a reminder of the failure of their Arabisation project or as a means to amend it.

A typical example of how this "intermediate" variety of Darija, also known as *ad-Dārija al-Wusṭā*, is used to enhance the linguistic and cultural competencies in Standard Arabic among North Africans, thereby advancing the Arabisation project, is reflected in the efforts of the Zakoura Foundation. Established in 1997 in Casablanca, this foundation published a dictionary in Darija with the explicit aim of perpetuating, renewing, and expanding Standard Arabic and the culture it represents, as advocated in Chekayri (2018).

The paradox lies in the fact that institutions like Zakoura, which claim to promote rural development, use the local mother tongue, Darija, not to sustain it but as a means to introduce the exogenous and dominant Standard Arabic through an intermediate linguistic form, *Dārija al-Wusṭā*. They do not hesitate to employ other dominant languages, such as French and English, for broader exposure and economic facilitation. For instance, Zakoura's current website is almost entirely in French, with no Darija presented – only its speakers are depicted through typical rural images. Thus, Darija, like other interactionally "dominated" languages, becomes merely a tool for obtaining and maintaining power, both politically and economically.

Figure 1. Maroc Telecom advertising[1]

[1] Source: https://www.iam.ma/index.aspx (Accessed 2024-10-01).

It is hardly surprising then that one of the first sectors to adopt Darija in public spaces after independence was the telecommunications industry; an industry that continues to do so for the same neo-capitalistic objectives.

For instance, Figure 1 illustrates how nowadays stakeholder *Maroc Telecom* draws on Darija, often framed within a multilingual setting, to attract customers; e.g., the expression عِش الفُرجة *ʿiš al-furža* 'Live the spectacle' in Darija sets the focus of the attention, while la fibre 'the fiber' and Méga in French, together with the Standard Arabic إلى غاية *ʾilā ġāya* 'up to' provide more practical details.

Conversely, there is an emerging interest group that seeks to "organically" standardise Darija through various forms of creative and educational expression, including writing. Digital media have been particularly instrumental for this purpose, as they facilitate heteroglossic practices, which refer to "multilingual interactions relating to diverse intersubjective voices construed from diverse sociocultural interactional positions" (Lafkioui 2021). In the case of Darija, this is supported by heterography based on either the Arabic or Latin alphabet (Section 5).

3. Darijation

Darija, as a lingua franca in North Africa, is increasingly infiltrating all areas of interaction, including those traditionally dominated by other languages, such as French and Spanish. Language choices and usages, often featuring jargon specific to contexts like academia where French was once prevalent, now frequently include Darija. This often involves code-switching with other dominant languages such as Spanish or English, and occasionally with Tamazight as well. In fact, switching between Darija and Tamazight on social media is a common practice among certain groups, serving various interactional purposes, including playfulness.

The ascendancy of Darija across diverse spheres of interaction is a direct outcome of Institutional Arabisation, which established Standard Arabic as the exclusive official language.

This policy, rigorously enforced in the 1980s and further entrenched in the 1990s, precipitated a profound transformation in the educational landscape of North Africa. Subjects formerly taught in French, such as science, are now predominantly conducted in Standard Arabic within national public education systems. Notwithstanding, this shift frequently involves a dynamic interplay with Darija, French, and English, reflecting the complex and evolving linguistic and cultural landscape of the region.

Despite the apparent failure of the Arabisation process, particularly evident in public education and research, authorities persist in advocating for the use of Standard Arabic throughout society. However, many argue that a more effective approach might involve preserving local identities through Darija and Tamazight, potentially alongside a pragmatic re-engagement with languages like French or a shift towards English, which offer greater international influence and visibility (see also e.g., Bouziane & Saoudi 2021).

English is not new to North Africa, especially in Morocco, where American influence – both civil and military – have been significant since the early twentieth century. This

influence is increasingly visible through various private educational networks, such as the American Institute for Maghrib Studies (AIMS), established in 1984, with affiliated partners in Tangier (TALIM), Oran (CEMA), and Tunis (CEMAT).

Although Arabisation remains a significant sociopolitical effort deeply embedded in Arab-Islamic culture, this policy has not fully supplanted the widespread use of Darija. Instead, the current situation highlights a shift from Arabisation to what Lafkioui (2024: 23) terms "Darijation" – "the systematic adoption and proliferation of Darija across all levels of society, including formal interactional settings". Darija has gained substantial traction in North African society, especially in Morocco, where it has increasingly overshadowed Tamazight. Traditionally spoken by the majority, particularly in rural areas where it was the sole language for many, Tamazight is now being eclipsed by the rise of Darija. The aggressive Arabisation campaigns of the 1990s in Morocco and Algeria profoundly reshaped the sociolinguistic landscape, triggering a swift shift from Tamazight to Darija.

This transformation, intimately linked with the propagation of Sunni Islam, deftly benefits from religious institutions like the Institut Mohammed VI pour la formation des Imams Morchidines et Morchidates, established by the Moroccan monarchy in 2013. These hubs of authority equip imams with specialised training, moulding them into key figures within a broader strategy that blends linguistic and religious objectives. Through the prism of an Islamic framework, these imams are tasked with advancing Standard Arabic – a strategic move aimed not only at countering the influence of Shiism but also at subtly pressuring Tamazight speakers to relinquish their ancestral language, often via the intermediary of Darija when necessary. As a result, Darija, typically downplayed by policymakers as a mere dialectal branch of Standard Arabic, emerges as a deliberate tool for Arabisation, reinforcing this calculated agenda. Institutions such as Zakoura, which push the adoption of Standard Arabic under the guise of Darija, encapsulate this orchestrated effort (see Section 2.2).

Consequently, a significant portion of the Tamazight-speaking community has transitioned to Darija, adopting it not only as their first language (L1) but as the educational foundation for their children – a decision shaped by the desire for academic success and social mobility, and, in some cases, guided by religious undercurrents. Ironically, some religious leaders, including state-appointed imams, publicly denounce Tamazight and its cultural practices while paradoxically utilising the very languages they seek to undermine, whether Tamazight or Darija, in their own discourse (Lafkioui 2024).

Darija faces disparagement not only from policymakers but also from its own speakers, who exhibit ambivalent attitudes toward it. Often ridiculed in comparison to Standard or Classical Arabic and other dominant languages like French – whose prestige remains high and continues to serve as the lingua franca among the elite – Darija is frequently undervalued. Nonetheless, it remains crucial for conveying emotion, particularly in verbal interactions, unless one is entirely immersed in the "select international bubble" where French and English predominate, such as in expatriate communities and their international schools.

Even within the realm of vernacular Arabic varieties, i.e., the so-called "Arabic dialects", Darija is perceived as anomalous, as deviant even. This is illustrated by the meme in Figure 2, which depicts Darija as the sole nonconformist in an otherwise harmonious

and traditional family of Arabic and its varieties. This deviation from norms does not inherently carry a negative connotation. In reality, the significance of this portrayal is highly context-dependent. On social media, where the meme is frequently recontextualised, Darija's unique characteristics are often embraced positively. It is used constructively to foster collective identities, such as Moroccan identity, highlighting how Darija's distinctiveness can contribute to cultural cohesion and pride.

Another striking feature of Figure 2's meme lies in the attribution of Classical Arabic to the father and Standard Arabic to the mother. This portrayal defies the typical belief that women tend to be more conservative in preserving and transmitting language, particularly since Standard Arabic is a contemporary evolution of Classical Arabic. By assigning the father the role of guardian of Classical Arabic – viewed as the pinnacle of linguistic purity – the meme reinforces established Arabic-Islamic cultural (including gender) norms. In this context, Darija seems conspicuously detached from the lineage represented in the meme, almost as though it is marginalised from the patriarchal heritage entirely.

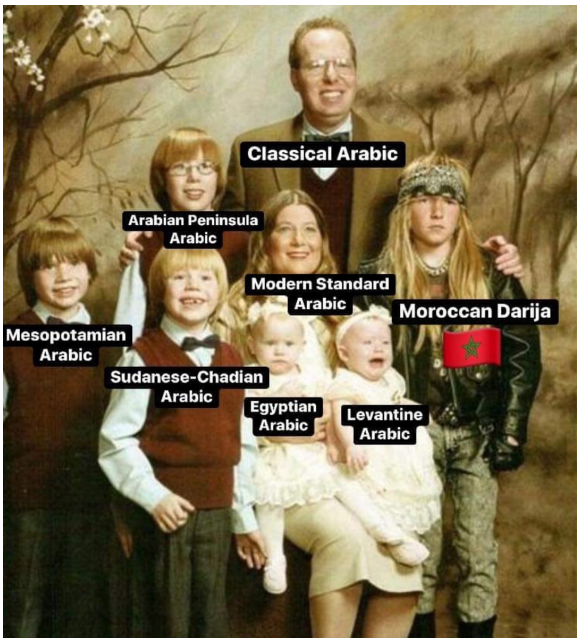


Figure 2. Meme of Darija amidst Arabic varieties[2]

An additional remarkable illustration of Darija's distinctiveness can be seen in a popular YouTube video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=blrGmR4-qaY) titled "Students Speak Different Arabic Dialects" and wherein young people compare their primary languages, including Darija and various Middle Eastern Arabic varieties. Despite the laughter

[2] Source: https://ifunny.co/picture/classical-arabic-arabian-peninsula-arabic-modern-standard-arabic-moroccan-darija-mR1MNQou7?s=cl

and teasing directed at his "translations" into Darija – some of which incorporate French and Spanish – the young Darija-interactant remains unphased. His confidence and even pride in Darija reflect a relatively recent phenomenon, particularly noticeable on social media platforms. This video has generated thousands of comments, in English mainly!

Here are some to illustrate the phenomenon; quoted comments are retaken as such here: @NUNS posts as comment "The moroccan didn't even bring the deepest vocabulary of Darija and they're still confused", to which replies, for instance, @aaabatteries5576 by saying "the only one I understood I'm Algerian", while @die4race says "That's because Darija is a Language on itself, its not just a Dialect" and @nanaa428 "dude i dont even think darija is 3arabi", to which @omarfilali6659 replies "it's not Arabic, definitely not, as a moroccan, I think moroccans are not arabs, either arabiszed moroccans(aerobi), riffi, shloh, Amazigh (berber), so basically the most common darija you hear from moroccans, is either, barbarized arabic or arabized amazigh and some morocconized french and spanish depending on the…". Comments from non Darija-interactants, like that of @cooldiamondgamer611 in "I am arab and everything he said was gibberish to me", are also common.

The recent shift in the representation of Darija, relative to how Tamazight is represented, marks a significant development in North Africa's current sociolinguistic landscape. This transformation will be addressed in detail in the following Section 4, while focusing on Morocco.

4. Darija as Tamazight heritage

In North Africa, the recognition of Amazigh identity is closely tied to the use of Tamazight, emphasising the deep connection between language and ethnocultural belonging. As a result, the Imazighen's struggle for greater rights revolves largely around the acknowledgment and preservation of Tamazight. Tamazight, along with its endogenic script, Tifinagh, serve as powerful icons of "Amazighness", i.e., the "translocal Amazigh collective identity", referred to as *Tamuzgha* (or variants) in Tamazight (Lafkioui 2024). Despite the everyday dominance of other – often pluricentric – languages, Tamazight remains a defining feature of Amazigh identity and plays a pivotal role in shaping social and institutional power, especially in Morocco, which counts the largest numbers of Tamazight-interactants. In other words, discussions of Amazigh identity frequently focus on language, reflecting how ethnic and cultural identities in North Africa are closely intertwined with linguistic choices (Lafkioui 2013, 2024).

Traditionally, Tamazight-interactants, much like Darija-interactants, have regarded Darija as a degraded form of Standard or Classical Arabic. It has often been dismissed as the vernacular of uneducated rural descendants of the Arab invaders who swept into North Africa – the so-called *ʿrubiyya*. The term "Arab" frequently encompassed Arabised Amazigh populations who had lost their connection to their ancestral Tamazight tongue.

However, perceptions among Tamazight-interactants have begun to evolve in recent years. Darija is no longer seen solely as the native language of Arabic speakers or Arabs, nor is it scorned as the language of "lost" Imazighen. Instead, a growing movement –

largely fuelled by social media – is actively reframing Darija's identity. It is increasingly recognised not just as a dialect of Arabic, but as a language deeply intertwined with Tamazight, reflecting a unique linguistic fusion. Many now see Darija as distinctly North African, heavily influenced by Tamazight's linguistic and cultural heritage. This perspective is gaining traction even among Darija-interactants with no command in Tamazight, who share in this revaluation.

This is instanced in Figure 3, which illustrates this phenomenon perfectly through an excerpt of a post about Darija on a website *Framed à la Tamazight*, as understood in Lafkioui (2013: 142) and so "indicating the overall pro-Amazigh intersubjective viewpoint and, hence, offering a general template to interpret the online discourses". The site is hosted by *Imazigheninusa*, one of the most active Facebook groups and its associated social media outlets, primarily Instagram and Twitter. Stances similar to those expressed in this post are increasingly common among Darija-interactants, particularly among younger generations who have grown up in an era of globalisation and digital media. These individuals are acutely aware of the impact of these forces on society and their own Amazigh heritage, though they have not directly experienced the intense sociopolitical repression of earlier times. While repression still exists in different forms, linguistic and cultural rights have seen some recent advancements for Tamazight, which has been recognised as an official language of Morocco since 2016.

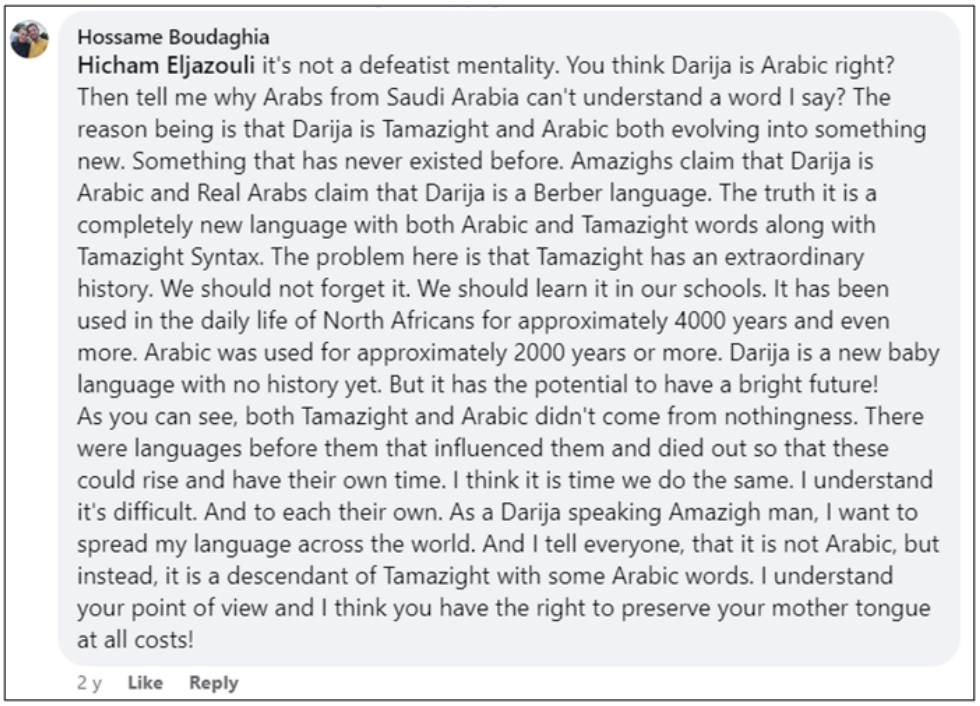


Figure 3. Post about Darija on a website *Framed à la Tamazight*[3]

[3] Source: www.facebook.com/groups/Imazigheninusa (Accessed 2024-10-01).

A major catalyst for the evolving perception of Darija is the increasing recognition among the Amazigh people of the pivotal transition from Tamazight to Darija. This change drives Darija-interactants, particularly those who have lost their Tamazight skills or never acquired them, to seek a deeper understanding. Concurrently, there is a rising consciousness among Darija-interactants, including within the *ʿrubiyya*, of their Amazigh heritage. This has led quite some of them to assert their identity more visibly, even via methods like DNA testing, which has recently become a popular topic on social media. For many, this evolving perspective presents a strategic opportunity to leverage the recognition of Tamazight as an official language for a range of sociopolitical, administrative, and economic advantages.

For those dedicated to preserving the Tamazight language and culture, this emerging trend is deeply troubling. If Darija is increasingly seen as part of Tamazight heritage, it could potentially threaten the survival of Tamazight itself. The expansion and entrenchment of "Darijation" could lead to the further erosion of Tamazight, particularly if this process unfolds organically from the grassroots level. Paradoxically, the very force capable of halting this organic process of Darijation – should such an intervention be desired – might be the formal recognition of Darija as an official language, which would necessitate its standardisation through top-down mandates. Such an institutionalisation could potentially undermine the fluid, adaptive nature of Darija, stifling its grassroots evolution and transforming it into a regulated linguistic form, disconnected from its dynamic, living roots (Section 5).

Thus, a profound sociolinguistic tension exists between Darija and Tamazight, a reality deeply felt by many Tamazight-interactants in their daily lives, particularly those who hold a strong connection to their ancestral heritage. Aware of the risks posed by a complete shift to Darija, these interactants grapple with the preservation of their linguistic roots. Memes, such as the one depicted in Figure 4, emerge as cultural tools, sparking dialogue and engaging in this ongoing debate surrounding language, identity, and heritage.

In this codeswitched meme, Tarifit (i.e., the Tamazight language of northern, northwestern, and northeastern Morocco) is written in Latin script, while Darija is rendered in Arabic script. The distinction between the two writing systems is significant, as it highlights the cultural differences they represent. In other words, the meme portrays the competing languages distinctly – illustrated through the representation of a healthy versus a disabled girl – and their use differs not only in content but also in form, with Latin script for Tarifit and Arabic script for Darija, as the Latin script is often regarded as the most "modern" choice among Tamazight-interactants (Lafkioui 2013, 2024).

So, the meme depicts Tarifit as the dominant force, with a girl speaking Tarifit pushing another girl, who speaks Darija, in a wheelchair. The girl steering the wheelchair asks in Tarifit, "Aren't you of Rif origin?", to which the girl in the wheelchair replies in Darija, "Yes, my father is a Rif Amazigh, but I don't speak Tarifit". In response, the Tarifit-speaking girl pushes her into an abyss, shouting "Then off you go into the abyss".

Interestingly, this meme also highlights the digital creator's greater proficiency in Darija compared to Tarifit, evident through the differences in orthographic and grammat-

ical quality and coherence between the two languages. Ironically, this linguistic imbalance may be the driving force behind the "dramatic" stance taken in Tarifit, emphasising the urgent need to preserve and revitalise Tamazight.

Additionally, the intersentential code-switching within the meme plays a crucial role in managing the interaction, functioning as a tool for turn-taking while also signalling shifts in stance. In so doing, this complex meme – like most memes – instantiates the concept of "conventionalised heteroglossia" (Lafkioui 2019, 2021), which relies heavily on "intertextuality" and will be addressed in the following Section 5.

Figure 4. Codeswitched meme (Tarifit – Darija) about language and identity[4]

5. Framing and Reframing Darija globally and digitally

Darija was represented by online content right from the beginning of the technological revolution and the creation of the World Wide Web, mainly through the commonly known chat rooms, fora, and blogs, along with various sites showcasing their edited content. However, it was with the advent of Web 2.0 that the landscape truly shifted for Darija. The transition from professionally edited content to user-generated material, facilitated by various online creative communities, significantly expanded its opportunities for creation and sharing.

While digital media enable Darija interactants to freely share, discuss, and develop content as they wish with minimal interference, some oversight is still exercised by platform moderators, who may refute or modify content when deemed necessary. After

[4] Source: https://www.facebook.com/groups/anessentarifit (Accessed 2024-10-01).

all, digital platforms remain institutionalised spaces that regulate, to some extent, the nature and function of interactions and shared material (Lafkioui 2008, 2013). Nonetheless, online exchanges are typically negotiated in a relatively symmetrical manner.

A notable example of how Darija has been digitally – and consequently globally – reframed is reflected in its evolving writing practices. One of the most significant milestones in the bottom-up standardisation and dissemination of Darija is its recent integration into Wikimedia, particularly Wikipedia (for a general overview of wiki-Darija, see Sedrati & Ait Ali 2019). Although these grassroots initiatives face challenges stemming from the heterography inherent to Darija as a non-standardised language, the interactive nature of such platforms offers the best chance for its preservation. These efforts encompass a wide range of informal expressions, covering informative, educational, and creative content. Some exceptional and promising examples come from authors like Mourad Alami, Hamid El Mahdaoui and Farouk El Merrakchi, who challenge the belief held by some Moroccan intellectuals that Darija is ill-suited for conveying "higher" cultural expressions – a view reflected, for instance, in Abdellah Laroui's interview for alyaoum24.com on 21 November 2013 [5]. Their works serve as counterexamples, demonstrating Darija's potential in articulating complex and culturally significant ideas.

Although online platforms typically *Framed à la Tamazight* are increasingly incorporating Darija due to the ongoing process of Darijation, the reverse is also true. Platforms and settings centred around Darija are gradually referencing and even using Tamazight. In some cases, this includes artistic expressions, such as the many comedic sketches in Darija that have long integrated Tamazight – often in a stylised, mocking manner. However, following Tamazight's official recognition in Morocco, its presence in such contexts has become more overt.

Darija's interaction with Tamazight, as well as with vernacular French and potentially other languages, has been ongoing for a long time, not only in North Africa but also in the diaspora (Lafkioui 1998, 2006). The key difference is that with the globalisation and digitalisation of communication, the degree of hybridisation – and the resulting shifts in the interactive landscape – has taken a significant leap. This is evident in how people express themselves and the increasing heteroglossia of the language forms they use, a phenomenon that is termed "conventionalised heteroglossia".

This latter concept stands for

> 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 (Lafkioui 2024: 31).

In other words, in the context of globalisation, especially in migration, Darija is increasingly contributing to multilingual interactions, testifying to the fluidity and adaptabil-

[5] Al-ʿarwī: Ḥāwalt al-kitāba bi-d-dāriža, https://alyaoum24.com/167927.html (Accessed 2025-06-05).

ity of language, and so showcasing how individuals navigate diverse linguistic landscapes in "glocal" interactions, interrogating the traditional correlation between languages and social as well as ethnocultural identities.

In this intricate sociolinguistic landscape, Darija may facilitate the accommodation, socialisation, and emancipation of multilingual interactants, whether of North African descent or not. As a matter of fact, the linguistic interactions of Darija-interactants – especially in the diaspora – are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural identity, historical background, and sociopolitical dynamics. In certain interactional contexts, this can lead to sophisticated multilingual code-switching between structurally distinct languages, both genetically and typologically, a phenomenon referred to as "incongruous multilingual code-switching" in Lafkioui (2021), of which the following example is retaken.

wa	**3ayyeqti**,	*die bal,*	*die bal,*	*daar*	*moete*	*zijn*,		
INTJ	exaggerate.PFV.2SG,	DIST ball,	DIST ball,	DIST	must.AUX.PRES.2SG	be,		
wa	HANDICAP **3ayyeqti**		*zijde*	*gij*	***ṯeddaɣreḏ***	*of*	*zo*	*jong*
INTJ	handicap exaggerate.PFV.2SG		be.PRES.2SG	2SG	be.blind.PFV.2SG	or	what	young

'Come on, that ball, that ball, there you should be, oh you nitwit come on, are you blind or what, man.'

In this complex configuration, the Darija expression *wa 3ayyeqti* ('oh you exaggerate' > 'oh come on') is alternated a few times with vernacular Dutch (specifically of Ghent, Belgium), culminating in the hybrid switch *wa HANDICAP 3ayyeqti* ('oh you nitwit, come on'). In this instance, the Dutch noun *handicap* is inserted as a frozen interjection, carrying various discursive functions with a high indexical value, often emphasised prosodically. Interestingly, placing *handicap* in the preverbal position does not align with Darija's word order, which would favour *wa 3ayyeqti a handicap* (preceded by the vocative *a*) if *handicap* were used as a vocative interjection. In fact, this configuration would not be adequate in Dutch either, but it would be in Tarifit (Tamazight of the Rif; North, Northwest, Northeast Morocco), indicating that Tarifit may be the base language of the hybrid switch. Additionally, the final switch to vernacular Dutch involves a sentence-internal switch, where the conjugated verb phrase *ṯeddaɣreḏ* ('you are blind') in Tarifit is used in place of an adverb, which vernacular Dutch morphosyntax would typically require in such a construction. Complex instances like this one serve various interactive purposes, including conveying intense emotions such as excitement and frustration, as is the case here.

These phenomena of "incongruous multilingual code-switching", which are becoming increasingly common in superdiverse, globalised contexts – especially in youth language – challenge our understanding of language evolution. They compel us to pay greater attention to the impact of language contact and digital mediation, which has opened the door to hybridisation on a wide scale. Despite the widespread cross-pollination driven by globalisation and digitalisation, much of it is fleeting. What remains, relatively speaking, is the result of "conventionalised heteroglossia", a process of routinisation that anchors these hybrid forms in both sociocognitive and substantial spatial dimensions.

In addition to being one of the languages of socialisation within the diaspora – used not only in intra-ethnic but also inter-ethnic contexts such as neighbourhood work and

youth outreach – Darija is increasingly becoming part of the multilingual landscape, both in urban settings and at national and transnational levels. For instance, expressions like *iwa* 'so, come on' and *iwa d-drari* 'come on guys' (VOC DEF-boys.PL), originally from Darija, have been adopted by children in Belgium and are now gaining national recognition and spreading (Lafkioui 2021).

A more prominent example, which recently caused a stir in France, is the Darija word *waš*, often rendered as *wesh*. Initially a question word, *wesh* has evolved into a filler word in French slang, serving a variety of interesting interactional functions, including signalling agreement or dissent. This is illustrated by the meme in Figure 5, where it precedes the vernacular French expression "Wesh vous faites quoi en Syrie" ('So what the heck are you doing in Syria.').

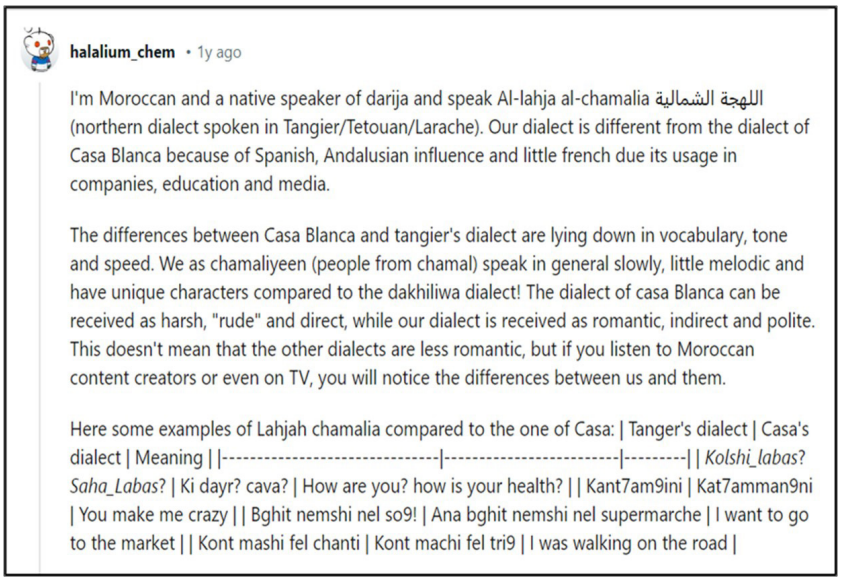
Figure 5. *WESH*-meme in vernacular French[6]

A significant amount of "conventionalised heteroglossia" related to "Digital Darija" – i.e., Darija shaped by interaction on digital platforms – can be observed in metalinguistic interactions, where speakers engage in reflective, metacognitive awareness of linguistic structures and variation. These instances often highlight that competition exists not only between Darija and Tamazight but also among the numerous varieties of Darija. This rivalry is evident not only at the national level, as seen in the classic examples of Moroccan Darija versus Algerian Darija, but also at the local level, as demonstrated by the following example, which echoes certain well-known offline stereotypes, such as rural (e.g., Casablanca) versus urban (e.g., Tangier) varieties.

Ultimately, Darija cannot escape the influence of globalisation, which, under neo-capitalist pressure, imposes socio-cultural templates worldwide. These templates, shaped by Anglo-Saxon culture from the Global North and its various "Englishes", dictate how individuals – socially interactive and adapted to the digital age – should present themselves and behave. The subsequent excerpts in Figures 7 and 8 exemplify this phenomenon, which manifests not only in the visual composition and semiotic features of these digital posts but also in their discursive content. This is particularly apparent in the

[6] Source: https://x.com/(Accessed 2024-10-01).

stereotypes depicted in Figure 8, including those pertaining to gender (e.g., the theme of "girls and love") and ethnicity (e.g., the themes of "red flags" and the problematisation of Moroccan identity).



halalium_chem • 1y ago

I'm Moroccan and a native speaker of darija and speak Al-lahja al-chamalia اللهجة الشمالية (northern dialect spoken in Tangier/Tetouan/Larache). Our dialect is different from the dialect of Casa Blanca because of Spanish, Andalusian influence and little french due its usage in companies, education and media.

The differences between Casa Blanca and tangier's dialect are lying down in vocabulary, tone and speed. We as chamaliyeen (people from chamal) speak in general slowly, little melodic and have unique characters compared to the dakhiliwa dialect! The dialect of casa Blanca can be received as harsh, "rude" and direct, while our dialect is received as romantic, indirect and polite. This doesn't mean that the other dialects are less romantic, but if you listen to Moroccan content creators or even on TV, you will notice the differences between us and them.

Here some examples of Lahjah chamalia compared to the one of Casa: | Tanger's dialect | Casa's dialect | Meaning | |----------|----------|---------| | *Kolshi_labas? Saha_Labas*? | Ki dayr? cava? | How are you? how is your health? | | Kant7am9ini | Kat7amman9ni | You make me crazy | | Bghit nemshi nel so9! | Ana bghit nemshi nel supermarche | I want to go to the market | | Kont mashi fel chanti | Kont machi fel tri9 | I was walking on the road |

Figure 6. Metalinguistic excerpt from Reddit[7]

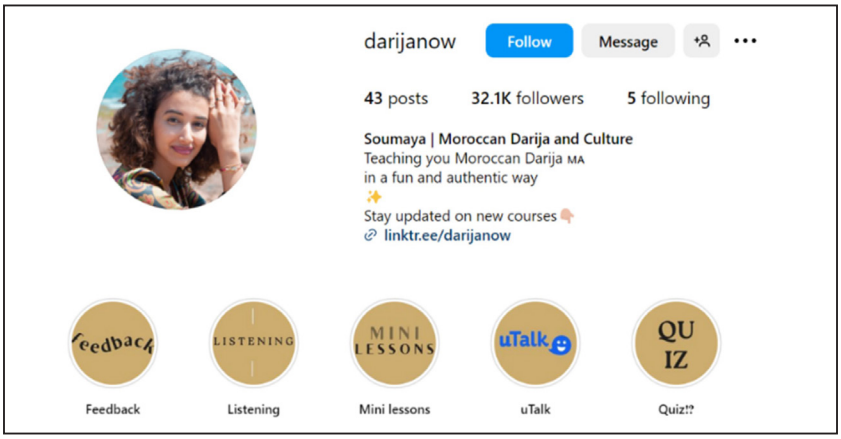


Figure 7. "Darijanow" by Soumaya on Instagram[8]

[7] Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/learn_arabic/comments/zed1gu/moroccan_darija_some_resources_for_beginners/ (Accessed 2024-10-01).

[8] Source: https://www.instagram.com/darijanow/ (Accessed 2025-06-05).

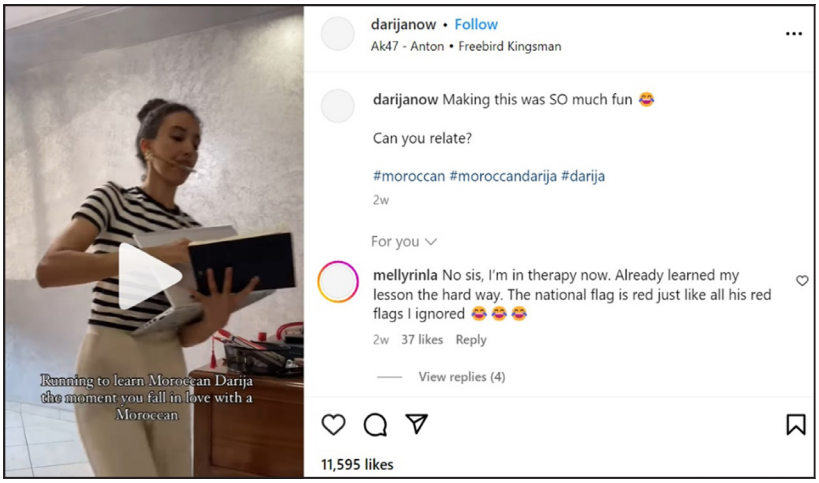


Figure 8. Comment & video excerpts of "darijanow" on Instagram[9]

6. Conclusion

Darija, particularly what is referred to here as "Digital Darija", exemplifies the concept of "vernacular globalisation" (Appadurai 1996: 10), enabling the reframing of dominant languages and shifting them away from an asymmetric system where they hold normative positions. In this multilingual, digital, and globalised context, Darija heavily relies on "conventionalised heteroglossia", utilising intertextuality extensively – not only in typical examples of memes (as seen in Figures 2, 3, and 5) but also in much of the content shared on platforms like Instagram, including the instances presented in Figures 7 and 8.

As a lingua franca, Darija finds itself in fierce competition with Tamazight, rapidly usurping its position. Moreover, as an unintended consequence of Institutional Arabisation, it is encroaching upon and replacing the functions and linguistic practices not only of Tamazight but also of traditionally dominant languages, such as Standard Arabic and French. This shift paves the way for a new linguistic landscape characterised by "Darijation". This grassroots phenomenon, supported by various online networks dedicated to preserving and developing Darija and its cultural expressions, poses a significant challenge to North Africa's sociopolitical policies, which continue to promote Standard Arabic as a linguistic and cultural icon despite its overall shortcomings.

Unrestrained neo-capitalism (exemplified in excerpts 1, 7, and 8) lies at the core of the instrumentalisation of politically non-dominant languages, such as Darija and Tamazight, as demonstrated in this study and supported by Lafkioui (2024). However, dominant interest groups have overlooked the impact and breadth of this instrumentalisation, particularly in the case of Darija, within the context of globalisation and digitalisation. This

[9] Source: https://www.instagram.com/p/C5V4KFxNdLi/ (Accessed 2025-06-05).

has influenced current policymaking, especially in education, a key area of contention. Certain stakeholders now advocate for the officialisation and integration of Darija into national education – a debate that gained momentum following the official recognition of Tamazight in Morocco in 2011.

One potential explanation for Darija's transnational success, reflected in the growing phenomenon of "Darijation", lies in its "ethnographically integrative" nature (Mufwene 2004: 206), which sets it apart from other lingua francas such as French or Standard Arabic. Unlike these more "segregative" languages (Mufwene 2004: 206), which primarily serve the elite and exclude the majority of North African populations, Darija facilitates socioeconomic integration and upward mobility for the broader populace by functioning as an endogenised lingua franca. Her success, however, comes at a cost, borne by her older endogenous sister, Tamazight. As Darija continues to rise in prominence, Tamazight faces the challenge of maintaining its sociolinguistic space, often overshadowed by the growing influence of Darija in both local and transnational contexts.

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