IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH BILINGUAL AMAZIGH- DUTCH DIGITAL DISCOURSE

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1. Introduction

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.[1] Now more than ever, these languages function as a central source for constructing and reconstructing the Amazigh group identity, a process in which literacy and electronic media play a significant role. One of the most far-reaching and all-encompassing media is the Internet. It allows individuals and groups to create new discourses and contexts: digital interactions.[2] Therefore, I will examine how identity is (re)constructed in digital interactions on Amazigh websites. I have 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. The Dutch-based Amazigh

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[1] 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.

[2] The expression 'digital interactions' denotes all kind of computer-mediated interactions.

websites considered in this study are most developed (see number and design of updated hyperlinks, subpages and items) and popular (see number of registered members and hits): *www.amazigh.nl* (7446 registered members on 25/06/08; 7912 forum topics) and *www.tawiza.nl* (1255 registered members on 25/06/08; 2652 forum topics).[3]

The most appropriate paradigm for a thorough understanding of the complex relationship between language and identity in a multicultural and multilingual computer-mediated context, such as the Dutch-based Amazigh websites, is the interactional sociolinguistic approach (Goffman 1974, 1981, 1983; Gumperz 1982; Gumperz & Hymes 1972; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990, 1992, 1994, 2001; Rampton 1995; among others), mainly because of its conceptualisation of identity as dynamic.[4] Identities are permanently constructed and reconstructed by interactants during digital interactions. A central position is attributed to the 'interactants', rather than disembodied language, who jointly construct and reconstruct meaning, and produce and reproduce cultural values, such as identities. With regard to the multiplicity (age, race, class, gender, ethnicity, geopolitical setting, social status, sexual orientation, religion...) and the hybridity of identity, this perspective permits in-depth analyses of an unlimited scale of variables by correlating social variables with linguistic variables in a multidimensional frame. The approach is enriched by using notions from the poststructuralist perspective, which is founded on the interactional paradigm. Most notably the focus on the factor power (especially political power) is crucial for this study, in the sense that speech as a social process can be a source of gaining and exercising power, and thus is fundamental for the (re)construction of identities by minorised or oppressed groups and individuals (Bourdieu 1982, 1991; Gal 1989; Heller 1988, 1992, 1995a/b; Pavlenko & Blackledge 2004; Blommaert & Verschueren 1998, 2003). Unequal power relations can obstruct the 'right to speak' and can lead to a repositioning of the 'dominated' interlocutor in the interaction context and a reconstruction of his or her identities (Bourdieu 1991).

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[3]   For a general iconographic examination of these Dutch-based Amazigh websites, see Merolla (2005).
[4]   Little attention has been paid to sociolinguistic and pragmatic topics of computer-mediated communication, with exception of some notable references such as Herring (1993, 1996, 1999), Georgakopoulou (1997, 2003) and Androutsopoulos (2006a/b).

2. Digital resources and Dutch-based Amazigh websites

The Internet interactants visiting Dutch-based Amazigh websites use mainly Dutch and Tarifit (Amazigh language of North Morocco) for their digital interactions.[5] 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 chat forum 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.[6] 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 (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

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[5] 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.

[6] The argumentative programme contains the interactive objectives and functions of the website.

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 different online contexts consisting of diverse interactive positions from which various identities can be constructed.

3. Reconstructing Amazigh identity by reconstructing Amazigh oral genres on the Internet

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:

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[7], has been drastically reconstructed in order to meet the linguistic and interactive criteria which the website "Tawiza" demands.[8] 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".[9]

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 2). Interestingly, the transfer of these literary genres from an oral

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[7] 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.

[8] The website operates here as a kind of "system of contextualisation conventions" as to speak in Gumperz' terms (1992).

[9] See Goffman (1974) for the concept of "footing".

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 imaginary that these riddles evoke and require in order to be comprehended.

Example 2:

Extract of riddles on Tawiza
(http://www.tawiza.nl/content/sectie.php?cid=48&secties=cat)

Examples 1 and 2 illustrate how certain literary genres and productions from the Amazigh oral tradition serve as a representative basis for constructing and claiming trans-local Amazigh identities. Bilingualism (or multilingualism) is a significant aspect of this identity creating-process for several reasons. For one thing, it expands the semiotic potential and hence the interactive capacity of the interactants. For another, it is an important indicator of how they project themselves in their digital discourse. The bilingual composition of the riddles of example 2, for instance, points to different functions and values that the website editors/designers have allocated to Tarifit and Dutch. Tarifit occupies a central position in the display of these riddles, which are written in two different Latin-based orthographic systems. The first and main transcript (first line of the riddle) is written in an orthographic system that the editors of the website Tawiza

generally use adequately, though without giving any information about it. This lack of information might explain why most submitted texts are written in the interactants' own orthography, as shown in the Tarifit expressions of example 1. The second transcript (fifth line of the riddle) is presented as the "standard" Amazigh orthography (*Standaard tamazight*), although in fact no unified or 'standard' Amazigh orthographic system – whether based on Latin, Arabic or Tifinagh (ancient Amazigh graphemes) alphabet – has yet been agreed, either for Tarifit as a single language or for the Amazigh language group as a whole. Its labelling as "standard" expresses the aspiration of the website editors to transmit these riddles – originally produced orally – in a 'modern' cultural format embodied in literacy and language homogeneity. The presentation of Tarifit as a 'written' and 'standardised' language not only responds to the ubiquitous demands and pressure for 'modernity' but also empowers it interactively by increasing its social and cultural status. The choice of a Latin-based orthographic system reinforces this status because this alphabet is commonly considered, both in the academic world and in activist circles, the most viable and 'modern' option for the writing of the Amazigh languages. Nonetheless, the Tifinagh alphabet is a significant contender in the Amazigh orthography debate (Lafkioui 2002).[10]

As measured both by the number of offered items and also by the number of hits these receive, narration (example 1) and poetry are the most productive genres of Amazigh literary productions on Dutch-based Amazigh websites.[11] Some of the most dynamic and popular Amazigh websites on which these genres function as symbolic cultural transmitters are "www.amazigh.nl", "www.timazighen.nl" and "www.tawiza.nl".

4. Chat-in-interaction: constructing the Self through digital interactions on Amazigh websites

The language representations of the interactants as expressed through their digital interactions on Amazigh websites are strongly connected to their social and individual histories and ideologies. The next excerpt

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[10]   The fact that the IRCAM (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe) has opted for the Tifinagh alphabet for their literacy practices has had a certain impact on the direction of the orthography dynamics of the Amazigh languages in Morocco.
[11]   See also Lafkioui (2008).

demonstrates this by means of a digital forum discussion between Yidir (male) and Drifa (female), two names that are most likely pseudonyms.[12]

Example 3:

Geregistreerd op: 13-10-2004 Berichten: 11	Ik sta soms versteld over het feit dat veel imazighen nog heel vaak of slecht of helemaal geen thmazight praten. Erger nog, zij praten Nederlands of Arabisch met elkaar.... 😊
	Ik krijg meteen een klap op m'n hoofd als ik alleen "ja, ik weet" zeg in het Nederlands van mijn ouders....
Naar boven	(👤 profiel) (👥 pb)

Extract of a chat forum interaction on Tawiza

Drifa opens the discussion by expressing her astonishment at the lack of knowledge of and proficiency in Tarifit among Imazighen youngsters in the Netherlands.[13] It is apparent that her parents monitor strictly her performance, and consequently also her proficiency, in Tarifit. She also utters her disapproval of the use of Dutch or Arabic in interactions between Imazighen, even though she uses herself Dutch for digital interaction with a fellow Amazigh:[14]

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[12] The use of pseudonyms is a common practice on chat sites (Bechar-Israeli 1995).

[13] The reference to The Netherlands is implicitly present in the semantic content of her discourse and its contextualisation on a Dutch-based website.

[14] The fact that Drifa does here the very thing she disapproves of suggests a discrepancy between her representations of Tarifit and her *in vivo* language practices. Tarifit as a digital resource accomplishes here the interactive function of symbolic marker – the icon – of the Amazigh group identity. In contrast, the instrumental function of language

Erger nog, zij praten Nederlands of Arabisch met elkaar… sad emoticon
Even worse, they speak Dutch or Arabic with each other… sad emoticon

Her negative attitude to this state of affairs is displayed by the expression *erger nog* (even worse) and the sad emoticon she has chosen to close her assessment with. The lexical choices she has made imply a recategorisation of the discourse object (forum topic), which is *Wie praat er Thmazight met z'n/haar ouders?* (Who speaks Tamazight with his/her parents?). By her lexical choices, Drifa strongly commits herself to her discourse and so increases the potential for interactional tension between her and her digital interactant, Yidir. However, the expression of this stance does not in fact entail a great risk of conflict between the interactants because a basic consensus is assured by the Amazigh website which functions as an attributive centring institution (Silverstein 1998) and gate-keeping apparatus (Gumperz 1982), regulating to some degree the language features, functions and contextualisation.[15] Most people who participate in the forum discussions on these websites adhere more or less to Amazigh activist ideologies (group-specific ideologies), a stance which is confirmed by the use of the emblematic expressions of *Azul* (Hello), *D wenni nta* (Goodbye), and in particular the expression *Tawmat N Imazighen* (The Amazigh brotherhood) employed by Yidir as a kind of signature at the end of his response. The component *Tawmat* (Brotherhood) of this latter expression reveals an implicit semantic and pragmatic reference to the trans-local but sub-cultural values embedded in the strongly mediated concept of "Afro-American Brotherhood".

In his response, Yidir agrees with Drifa's observation about Amazigh language "loss" among youngsters but attempts to provide excuses for it: *Dat heeft een oorzaak* (There is a cause for this). With a kind of authority accorded by himself to his discourse he attributes it to social, historical and political factors. In his opinion, the ones who are also to blame for this particular situation are the parents who prefer to teach *darija* (Moroccan Arabic) to their children for religious (*"taal" van religie* – "language" of

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– usually completed by interactive 'dominant' languages in offline contexts – is allocated to Dutch.

[15] The digital context also avoids, to a certain degree, the risk of loss of face of the interactants (see Goffmann 1967 for the concept of 'face').

religion), ideological (*"taal" van land* – "language" of country)[16] and/or economic (*"kan er geen brood mee verdienen"* – "you cannot make a living of it") reasons. It is them he considers responsible for the identity crisis they have inflicted upon themselves and their children.

Drifa replies in the third paragraph that she regrets this diminution of *onze mooie en unieke taal en identiteit* (our beautiful and unique language and identity). The deictic marker *onze* (our) of this excerpt indicates that Drifa identifies with the orthodox Amazigh group identity involving representations of language, culture and history.[17] Her adoption of this identity entails a certain rejection of the use of non-Amazigh languages in the presence of Amazigh-speaking people. To Drifa, embracing Amazigh identity means the assimilation of its language and history, as indicated in the following excerpt:

> *Het is eigenlijk het verlochenen afstand doen van jouw afkomst als je het niet spreekt en niet op de hoogte bent van het rijke en emotionele historische verleden van onze voorouders. Ik zal mijn kinderen het thmazight letterlijk en figuurlijk met de paplepen inbrengen… inschaAllah.*
>
> It is actually refuting (and) relinquishing your birthright if you do not speak it and are not aware of the rich and emotional historical past of our ancestors. I will feed thmazight to my children with a spoon literally and figuratively… God willing.

In ways like this, the Amazigh language is an essential defining aspect of Amazigh group identity, constructed in opposition to state hegemony, whether in North Africa or in the Diaspora. The concept of "Tamazight community" is strongly present in actual Amazigh activist offline and online discourses because the idea of "language community" increases the capacity to create group identities (Silverstein 1998).[18] And yet, this oppositional

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[16]   The notion of "country" refers here to the meaning of "country of origin" and so "homeland".

[17]   Drifa strongly commits herself to her discourse by using this deictic expression. In fact, the whole extract reveals a high degree of discursive commitment by the interactant.

[18]   However, the *in vivo* digital interactions of the interactants on Dutch-based Amazigh websites, and hence their interrelated identity-constructing practices too, are mostly bilingual or multilingual. People who participate in these interactions by sharing the required digital resources constitute a "speech community", a concept which contrasts

language-ideological alternative matches the hegemonic ideologies of linguistic and cultural exclusivity and modernity.

Chatting also allows for (meta-)discursive recontextualisation of Amazigh interactional instances, such as oral and written texts, through the reflexive nature of language (Rampton 2001; Verschueren 2001). The interaction in example 4 – which has *Vertaling van Tmazight naar Nederlands* (Translation from Tamazight into Dutch) as the forum topic – illustrates this phenomenon.

Example 4:

Extract of a chat forum interaction on Tawiza

In this excerpt, Ilizi asks how to translate two Amazigh expressions into Dutch:

Tennûrzm ay i tawwûrt deg ûârûr
Literally: A door has been opened in my back.
⇒ Expression used when someone feels a sudden sharp pain in his back.

_____

with that of "language community", which indexes the interactants' belief that they speak/write the same language (Silverstein 1998).

Têttf ay i tuccentt deg ûdâr
Literally: A female jackal is holding my leg.
⇒ Expression used when someone feels a sudden cramp in his foot.

Identity work is displayed here by the code-switching practices between Tarifit and Dutch. More explicit identity statements in this excerpt are the following signature-expressions:

Asermed di temzi am tira deg wezru (Tarifit)
Learning young is like carving in stone.[19]

De enige oplossing voor Arif is op zijn minste Autonomie (Dutch)
The only solution for the Rif is at least its autonomy.

Both stances are highly emotive but the Tarifit stance contains a greater symbolic and expressive load due to the linguistic code used.

During such bilingual chat forum interactions, a general consensus is reached between the interactants on the content of their discourses as well as on the interactional positions from which they express themselves. The digital context permits this negotiation of jointly (re)created identities – representations of the Self and the Other – from a symmetrical and relatively more convenient interaction position.

However, the Amazigh websites are institutionalised contexts which regroup different institutionalised genres within a wider trans-local "institutional discursive regime" (Fairclough 1992). Amazigh websites are flourishing discursive fora hosting group-specific-ideologies, some of them visible as symbolic group identity markers, others invisible because of their all-embracing features. The internet is a power-instrument with powerful symbols. The transfer of these multifaceted symbols over the Internet provides a huge semiotic potential for the construction and reconstruction of group identities.

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[19] It is the knowledge of Tarifit which is supposed in this utterance.

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