Multilingualism, Multimodality and Identity Construction on French-Based Amazigh (Berber) Websites

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Abstract: *This article investigates the vital processes of identity construction (i.e. interactive semiotic processes) on multilingual French-based Amazigh websites. It examines how the Internet as an instrument of globalisation allows people to perform the functions afforded by linguistic resources trans-locally and, accordingly, how it repositions these functions in the interactive (substantive and cognitive) space. The article also discusses the particular relationship between linguistic diversity, language representations and ethnic identity on minority websites through the analysis of the interactants' online discourses (edited and user texts).*

Résumé: *Le présent article s'interroge sur les principaux processus de construction identitaire (processus sémiotiques interactifs) sur les sites Web plurilingues amazighs à base française. Il s'attache à éprouver comment Internet, comme outil de la mondialisation, permet d'assumer les fonctions des ressources linguistiques translocalement et de les relocaliser dans l'espace interactif (espace substantiel et cognitif). Cette étude s'intéresse aussi au rapport particulier entre la diversité linguistique, les représentations linguistiques et les identités ethniques contenues et construites sur les sites Web minoritaires par le biais des analyses de discours électronique (textes édités et créatifs) des interactants.*

Keywords: Multilingualism, Multimodality, Identity, French-based Amazigh Websites
Mots clés : Plurilinguisme, Multimodalité, Identité, Sites Web amazighs à base française

1. Introduction

Despite the precarious and relatively marginal socio-political position of the Amazigh languages, an explosion of hybrid, in form and content, cultural expressions has occurred in recent years. Now more than ever, these languages function as a central resource for constructing and reconstructing 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: computer-mediated communication (CMC).

In this article[1], I address how identity is constructed and reconstructed through computer-mediated discourse (CMD) on Amazigh websites. In doing so, I examine one of the central claims of recent social theory - that 'traditional' collective identities, based on social class hierarchy and sustained by local and national institutions, are being substituted by more dynamic and transnational group identities which are strongly supported by electronic media.

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As multilingualism is a characteristic of the Amazigh websites and a defining aspect of their CMD, particular attention is paid in this article to language choice in order to create and negotiate group-specific identities. Through this specific language device, related to ethnicity and social class, the computer-mediated interactants express diverse aspects of their identity according to or contrasting with two essential hegemonic dynamics in the structuring of society, the horizontal or ethnic force (exclusion/inclusion) and the vertical or social class force (down/up). This contribution also sheds light on the nature and function(s) of multilingualism on the French-based Amazigh websites and hence on the way their editors and users create language and cultural norms and accommodations.

However, with regard to the 'integrating' perspective of the interactional approach that I adopt here (see *infra*), equal importance is given to the extra-linguistic aspects of the CMD, such as the macro offline context (historical, social, cultural and political context) to which the linguistic and discursive elements refer. Because of their all-pervading nature, globalisation processes and effects take a central place in this discussion, especially when they are found in 'the synergetic relationship between global and local' (Block 2004).

I have chosen to examine French-based Amazigh websites since they are most advanced and regularly updated. Moreover, these websites show a high level of creativity, related to North Africa's historical and sociocultural background and to the significant numbers of Amazigh people who show a keen interest in expressing their cultural tradition and identity by means of French or by means of multilingual interactions in which French takes a central position. These specific websites, and hence their minority nature, are essential for conveying alternative voices and for creating new identities in opposition to the hegemonic forces and structures to which the Imazighen[2] (Berber peoples) are subject.

Another reason for choosing this study subject is that the connection between language and identity in computer-mediated discourse (CMD) in general, and on minority websites in particular, is still in need of examination, especially when it deals with multilingual interactions (Androutsopoulos 2006a).

This study contributes to this current scientific debate and provides a theoretical account of the role played by the electronic media in the empowering and normalising of minority languages and cultures by studying user-related patterns of language use on Amazigh websites. In addition, it deals with the Amazigh languages and cultures, which have hardly ever been the object of research into CMD (except for Lafkioui 2008a, 2008b, 2011b, 2011c).

2. French-based Amazigh websites and online ethnography

The data on which this study is based are part of a substantial corpus of CMD on various African and Middle Eastern websites and their related diaspora websites, containing a wide range of multimodal texts from the edited and creative sections (web 2.0 included). They form one of the basic corpora of the computer-mediated part of my research programme on *Language, Identity and Power in the Multilingual Globalising Society*, the data collection for which began in 2002.

This existing corpus is built and still being extended by employing the online ethnography method (Döring 2003, Hine 2000) and therefore by monitoring systematically – with respect to the user's point of view – the online edited texts and the user sections.[3] Mediated interactant interviews supplement the data if needed. The edited sections are examined with

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[2] Except for academics, the Imazighen mostly avoid using the term 'Berber', which is considered pejorative because of its connection with the notion of 'Barbaric' and its derivatives.
[3] Interesting ideas about studying computer-mediated communication can be found in, among others, Androutsopoulos (2011), Danet & Herring (2007), Georgakopoulou (2003) and Herring (2004).

respect to the different genres occurring, the quantity of items per genre, the language(s) used, the authors and sources, updating frequency and the references to topics related to language variability, study and politics. As for the user sections examined in this study, data were collected essentially by browsing through each discussion forum on a regular basis and inventorying not only popular topics but all those related to language and language representation.

Online ethnography approaches are useful not only for methodological purposes but also because they "can advance our understanding of the roles of CMC in the (re)formation of micro-cultures and shared interactional histories not just in purely online communities but also in existing social relations" (Georgakopoulou 2006).

The French-based Amazigh websites considered in this study are the most developed (number and design of updated hyperlinks, subpages and items) and popular (number of registered members and hits) ones: *www.amazighnews.net, www.amazighworld.org, www.azawan.com, kabyles.com, www.kabyles.net, www.mondeberbere.com* and *www.tamazgha.fr.* Data presented in this article come from: *www.amazighworld.org, www.azawan.com, www.kabyles.net* and *www.monde berbere.com.*

3. Analysing computer-mediated discourse from a user-based viewpoint

The 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 Amazigh websites, is the interactional sociolinguistic approach (e.g. Goffman 1974, 1981; Gumperz 1982; Gumperz & Hymes 1972; Rampton 1995), mainly because of its conceptualisation of identity as dynamic. Identities are permanently constructed and reconstructed by interactants during CMD. 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. These processes play out differently in different interactional contexts (including interactants, setting and topic). Consequently, interaction is the point where the 'Social' and the 'Subject' meet, their only and unique place of mutual formation.

With regard to the multiplicity (age, 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 (Blackledge & Pavlenko 2002; Blommaert 2010; Blommaert & *al.* 2003; Bourdieu 1982, 1991; Encrevé & Fornel 1983; Gal 1989, 2006; Heller 1995). 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). Recent political events, such as the Jasmine revolt in Tunisia, show the consequential impact of electronic media on national and international socio-political discourses, empowering 'dominated' individuals and groups by allowing them the 'right to speak'.

4. Historical and socio-political context of the Amazigh question

Since ancient times, North Africa has been a place of encounter between different cultures. It was not until independence from European colonial powers that the Imazighen began to consider their Amazigh patrimony as in imminent danger of disappearing in favour of languages and cultures exogenous to North Africa. Indeed, it was only with the creation of the new post-colonial nation states that the 'collective' claim for Amazigh cultural, language and identity rights took shape in North Africa and its diaspora. The main instigator of this manifold movement was the exclusion of the Imazighen, despite their vital role in achieving independence,[4] from any decision-making and institutional power positions in the newly established pan-Arab-Islamic states. The absolute negation of Amazigh rights was canonised by the complete omission of Amazigh language and culture in their respective constitutions, which deemed Arabic (standard) the only official language.[5] The institutional arabisation that followed, supported by Arab-Islamic culture, played at that time – and still does – a central role in their language policies.[6] Currently, the languages that play an important role in power relations in the complex North African sociolinguistic situation are Arabic (literary/classical, modern/standard and the spoken varieties), French, Spanish and the Amazigh languages, only these last being endogenous to North Africa.

The Amazigh languages compose a family of about 35 languages (or variety groups) belonging to the large Afro-Asiatic phylum and are spoken by more than forty million speakers in North Africa and its diaspora.[7] Their varieties are grouped under various names. For example, in Morocco, the expression 'Tarifit' is used to indicate the Amazigh language spoken in North Morocco, 'Tamazight' is employed for that of central Morocco and 'Tachelhit' for that of the South. The Amazigh speakers concerned, however, traditionally use 'Tamazight' (Berber) to refer to all three. In any case, the linguistic reality does not perfectly correspond to these boundaries because of the existence of so-called 'language continua', which precludes any precise classification (Lafkioui 2007, 2008c). In this article, the term 'Tamazight' stands for the whole language family (phylum) and refers thus to any Amazigh language or variety.

As a result of on-going scientific research, increased and diversified cultural production and distribution, and the promotion of their cultural heritage, especially by numerous associations formed for this purposes, the Amazigh languages and cultures have, in the last two decades, experienced a drive that has rendered them socially and politically more visible. This growing force of change has probably contributed to the very recent (July 1st 2011) official recognition of the language rights of the Imazighen of Morocco, which was part of a general constitutional reform probably related to the latest social and political uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East.

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[4] Even when the resistance movement was lead by the Imazighen – especially in the field –, they were not allowed to participate in the negotiations that took place as independence became imminent between the 'representatives' of the fledgling states, mostly belonging to the non Amazigh-speaking urban aristocracy, and the colonial powers.

[5] Further south, however, in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the Tuareg languages have been considered national languages ever since their independence from Western powers.

[6] For more information about the current Amazigh claim, see Lafkioui (2013) and the special issue *Imazighen: una primavera berbera* in *LIMES*, *Rivista italiana di geopolitica* (2011/5). An interesting introduction to the history of the Amazigh identity movement is given in Maddy-Weitzman (2011).

[7] Although no exact figures exist, partly due to demographic and political issues as well as methodological problems, it is generally accepted that Morocco has the largest number of Amazigh speaking people in North Africa, who make up between 40% and 70% (according to the source) of that country's population.

This new constitution has provoked a memorable blow for language rights among North African states, in that its Article 5 attributes to a language other than Arabic a 'co-official' status for the first time in the history of the Moroccan monarchy:

> *L'arabe demeure la langue officielle de l'Etat. L'Etat oeuvre à la protection et au développement de la langue arabe, ainsi qu'à la promotion de son utilisation. De même l'amazighe constitue une langue officielle de l'Etat, en tant que patrimoine commun à tous les Marocains sans exception.*

> 'Arabic remains the official language of the State. The state ensures the protection and development of the Arabic language as well as the promotion of its use. Amazigh is likewise an official language of the State, as a common heritage of all Moroccans without exception.'

First, it should be noted that the above text speaks of one single Amazigh language, called *amazighe*, even though different Amazigh languages (or varieties) exist in Morocco and the project of creating one standard Amazigh language – one of the main objectives of the Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe (IRCAM), created in 2001 – is far from realisation.

It goes without saying that this first step towards the formal recognition of the Amazigh language(s) has marked a fundamental commitment to the Amazigh movement, notwithstanding its speculative phrasing, which some Amazigh supporters consider an act of favouritism towards the Arabic language. Many Amazigh activists are also suspicious of this legal restructuring because, as they see it, it would not be the first time the monarchy and its *makhzen* ('government') has not kept its word. As for most sceptics, they believe this reform of Amazigh and its adoption by the people would bolster the regime's legitimacy in these difficult times – at the same time taking away some of the opposition's strength –, a proactive strategy that would safeguard the throne, the latter having no true desire to concede its power to the democratically elected institutions and thus establish a 'constitutional monarchy' in the real sense of the word (Lafkioui 2011a).

The Amazigh languages have also acquired a national – though not 'official' – political status in Algeria, where the national institution HCA (Haut Commissariat de la Culture Amazighe) was established in 1995 to maintain and develop the Amazigh cultural patrimony. In all the other countries of North Africa, the struggle for the Amazigh language and cultural rights has, for the time being anyway, achieved even fewer results.

The recent insertion of the Amazigh languages in the national education programmes of Morocco and Algeria is an important outcome of these developments, even though they are mainly still treated as 'dialects' of 'minorities' with a low socio-cultural status whose inclusion is only for the purpose of improving the proficiency of standard Arabic.[8] However, the most recent socio-political changes in North Africa, which have lately increased in magnitude under social pressure such as the events of the 'Arab Spring'[9], have had some impact on the language and cultural representations of 'Tamazight' among both Amazigh and non-Amazigh speaking people: the Amazigh people are no longer commonly considered an 'ethnic stateless minority' speaking in some strange 'Arabic varieties' whose aim is to sow discord in order to harm the national and nationalist pan-Arab-Islamic community.

5. Multilingual resources and multimodal (re)contextualisation

Even though French is the default linguistic resource on the French-based Amazigh websites, a great deal of multilingualism is displayed in their edited and user sections. Languages such as Tamazight, Arabic (both North African and standard), English and even Dutch, German

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[8] This linguistic policy perfectly fits the linguistic-educational programmes for minority languages existing in the diaspora.

[9] The use of the adjective 'Arab' is problematic in this expression, especially when it is applied to North Africa where the Amazigh people and their fight for their ethnic and political rights cannot be neglected.

and Spanish are employed for various communicative and meta-communicative purposes. Whether the minority websites are devoted primarily to social networking or content sharing, multilingualism is a defining feature of their intricate social and cultural practices. Even the commercial adverts are often displayed in different languages while occurring on one single webpage.

The Internet interactants are constrained in their language choice for their CMD by their own language repertoire (linguistic competencies and interactive skills) as well as by the CM context in which the interactions occur. CM context involves both the context of a specific interaction instance in a precise timeframe (a chat forum interaction for example) and the overall context of the transnational Amazigh website. Having access to these contexts and hence to their benefits and restrictions implies sharing the CM resources which the websites require; in this case, French, Tamazight, English and Arabic function as the main linguistic and interactive resources.

Sharing these resources entails, h,owever, the exclusion of others, such as Italian, which may be motivated differently following what I call the 'argumentative programme' of the website, which contains the interactive objectives and functions of the website. Tamazight primarily accomplishes the function of symbolic marker of specific group identities (e.g. Amazigh, Islamic, Maghreb, North African, Beur) in opposition to various other local and trans-local group identities, for instance the Turkish identity (local 'ethno-linguistic' identity), the French identity (local national identity) and the Christian identity (trans-local international identity). A more pragmatic and instrumental function is assigned to French as a CM resource, even though it may indicate a French group identity in contrast with other national identities, such as the American or British identity on English-based minority websites or the Dutch group identity on Dutch-based Amazigh websites (Lafkioui 2008b, 2011c).

Different interactive functions and social categories (values) are thus associated with different resources, whether interactively performed or unperformed in online or offline contexts. Structures and functions of CM resources are layered and stratified (Fairclough 1992; Hymes 1966, 1996) and consequently identities – considered as semiotic interactive processes – too.

As national and local policies determine basically the sociolinguistic hierarchy of the languages used by the Imazighen in the offline context in North Africa and its diaspora, mother tongues such as Tamazight (e.g. as used by the Kabyle of North Algeria and the Jerbi of South Tunisia), generally with a non-official and minority status, cannot compete with the dominant languages such as Arabic (the language of the Islam and its *umma*, i.e. trans-national Islamic community), French (the only official language of France)[10] and English, which is generally seen as the most international language and which has been socially and interactively growing in importance since the electronic revolution.

Unlike the offline situation, the Internet as an apparatus of globalisation allows people to carry out functions of linguistic resources trans-locally. Accordingly, it relocates these functions in the interactive (substantive and cognitive) space. For example, the Amazigh languages, which in most North African countries are officially still considered as 'dialects' of 'minorities' with a low socio-cultural status, may gain prestige through the trans-local

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[10] In France, the Amazigh languages are part of the French 'minority' languages and therefore belong to France's national heritage according to Cerquiglini's report (April 1999). However, at the time of writing, the minority languages concerned are not recognised as such because France has not ratified the ECRML (European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages). Therefore no regional (which are identified with a particular territory of the state) or minority (which are not identified with a particular territory of the state) language has an official status in France. For a recent discussion about Tamazight in France, see e.g. Chaker (2013).

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 France 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.

The following excerpts illustrate this by showing how certain literary genres from both the Amazigh contemporary production and the Amazigh oral tradition serve as a representative basis for constructing and claiming trans-local Amazigh identities.[11] 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 CMD.

The multilingual Amazigh website 'Mondeberbere.com' was originally assembled in French. Although texts in Tamazight and English were added afterwards, the French interface is still the most updated and developed one. Like most of the Amazigh websites, this website offers under hyperlinks such as *Langue* and *Littérature* literary productions in Tamazight, written in Latin transcript and often translated into French (example 1).[12]

Example 1	**Allas n darengh**	*Récit d'origine*
	Gh tezwuri	*Au commencement*
	Tbedd yat tmalut	*Une ombre, de l'âge des "cornes"*
	Gh imi n usun	*Enseignait*
	Tamalut d iffaghen	*Aux portes du village*
	gh izmaz n taskiwin	*Que les esprits protecteurs*
	Ar tseghra i midden	*On quitté le lieu ;*
	ls sul ur llin igurramen	*Quant aux anciennes du clan*
	ls akw ffaghen darengh	*Elles arrosaient,*
	[…]	*Par-delà l'usure de leurs louches,*
	Afulay, Bariz, 02/2000	*Les blessures des récits.*
		[…]
		Afulay, Paris, Fév. 2000

The bilingual composition of this kind of poem points to different functions and values that the website editors have allocated to Tamazight and French. Tamazight is given relative prominence in the display of the poems by being located on the left-hand side of the subpage. The poems are written in a Latin-based orthographic system that the website editors generally use adequately. No precise information is given about this system, although some general suggestions about learning the Amazigh languages (e.g. alphabet, font, courses) are presented under the hyperlink *Langue*.

The literary productions (poems, stories, expressions, riddles, etc.) of this kind of author are usually created offline in Tamazight and translated into French once they are published on the Amazigh websites so as to meet their requirements as CM edited text. However, a good deal of literary text of this kind is presented exclusively in Tamazight or even solely in French. Indeed, websites such as 'Kabyles.net' clearly target a predominantly French-speaking audience, as evidenced by the major presence of French language and related cultural productions compared to the sections written in Tamazight, which are mainly grouped under the hyperlink 'kabylophonie'. Besides this latter section, most of the texts written in Tamazight are presented under the hyperlink 'Culture'. Its subpage *Poèmes* displays not only

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[11] As measured by both the number of items offered and the number of hits these receive, narration and poetry are the most productive genres of Amazigh literary productions on Amazigh websites (see also Lafkioui 2008a, 2008b).

[12] For a general iconographic examination of some (Dutch-based) Amazigh websites, see Merolla (2005).

offline published poetry in French, for instance of Rudyard Kipling and Omar Khayyam, but also locally entrenched 'French-based' poetry, which is made accessible to a trans-local public thanks to its CM publication (*global locality*), see e.g. <http://www.kabyles.net/l-algerienne,8268.html>.

Most people who contribute to the Amazigh websites by posting texts or by participating in discussions adhere more or less to Amazigh activist ideologies, as will be demonstrated further in this article. Indeed, in the context of the Amazigh claim and its efforts towards linguistic and cultural maintenance, development and sometimes even revitalisation, any language practice on these websites – even if it is not in Tamazight – is evidence of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1972, 1982, 1991) that points to a certain Amazigh collective identity which, by default, is shared by anyone participating in the online discursive activities, albeit in order to contest it. This is largely made possible by the fact that every Amazigh website functions as a 'framed space' (Goffman 1981, 230) indicating the overall pro-Amazigh intersubjective viewpoint and, hence, offering a general template to interpret the online discourses.

Another extract that exemplifies the pivotal role of multilingualism and multimodality on the French-based Amazigh websites comes from 'azawan.com', to which the website 'Mondeberbere. com' refers under the hyperlink *Musique*: one of the offline performances of the famous Amazigh artist of South Morocco, Raïssa Fatima Tabaamrant (and her group), is represented here by a Dailymotion film (<http://www.dailymotion.com/video/k5S8uBbjc36yWto4M M? start=81#from =embed>).   The online reproduction of this particular local music and dance performance makes it accessible at any moment to any interactant visiting the website and so renders it global, though not without changing the traditional setting involving a physically present audience at a single and unique time instance with whom the artists exchange specific verbal and non verbal routines. So, the original format of this kind of cultural production, performed in a particular language in specific offline contexts, has been reconstructed not only for commercial purposes (video format) but also in order to meet the linguistic and interactive criteria of the website 'azawan.com', which focuses on multilingualism (a trilingual interface: Tamazight, French and English) and multimodality (e.g. transcription and translation of texts, insertion of audio and video recordings, insertion of images of the artists). The Amazigh websites thus operate as a kind of 'system of contextualisation conventions' (Gumperz 1992), with French as the 'default' language (main interface), while the Amazigh languages are mostly used for symbolic, formulaic and meta-communicative purposes.

The CM recontextualisation (reframing) of the literary productions engages different dimensions (linguistic, social, cultural, and historical dimensions) that are all synchronised towards one signified feature: the CM production. CM recontextualisation has changed the creative potential of the offline performance but not without altering the social and cultural categories associated with it. Compared with the original text, which is usually considered as normative, the online version may be perceived as 'non-literary', 'non-authentic', 'non-Amazigh', in sum 'wrong-footed'.[13]

Interestingly, the transfer of literary genres from an oral local interactive context to a CM trans-local one deeply affects their very nature and structure but not their primary social and cultural function: the transmission and exchange of Amazigh culture and cultural tradition. Part of this cultural tradition is also the complex of symbolic imaginary that these literary productions evoke and require in order to be comprehended, which can be made visible online by means of diverse multimodal devices (written, verbal and visual formats).

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[13] See Goffman (1974) for the concept of 'footing'.

Because of the trans-local character of the CM cultural constructions, such as the literary productions discussed in this section, the CM context (French-based Amazigh websites) not only foregrounds their cognitive aspects, but also favours the (re)construction of minority group identities, such as the Amazigh group identity. For reasons of repositioning the Self and the Other in the global interactive space, trans-localism (trans-nationalism) forms an important impulse for the reconstruction of group identities (Vertovec 2001). Accordingly, the trans-local Amazigh identity has been relocated in these CM literary genres, which are embedded in various local contexts, such as French contexts represented mainly by the use of the French language on the French-based Amazigh websites in question (Appadurai 1995, Lafkioui 2008a, Meyrowitz 2005).

Furthermore, it should be mentioned that the safeguarding and renewal of the Amazigh languages is primarily associated with that of the Amazigh traditional culture, which goes far beyond literary productions (Lafkioui 2008a, 2011b). It also encloses all kind of practices connected with the local and trans-local ethnic and cultural heritage of the Imazighen, such as the naming of children, the weaving of tapestry, the manufacturing of pottery and various ancient religious pagan ceremonies. Accordingly, language is not only a way of performing culture but is fundamentally performative of culture. It is part of the interactive activities composing both traditional and contemporary culture, which is dialogically and constantly contextualised and recontextualised as soon as one interacts.

6. Iconisation of language and the construction of group-specific identities

In this section, I investigate how language norms and representations are engendered and fostered on Amazigh websites in order to create a pan-Amazigh identity. Indeed, the concept of 'Amazigh 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 (Lafkioui 2008b, 2011c). People who participate in the computer-mediated exchanges of the Amazigh websites by sharing the required CM resources constitute a kind of 'speech community', a concept which contrasts with that of 'language community', which indexes the interactants' belief that they speak or write the same language (Silverstein 1998).

The following example (2) demonstrate the phenomenon. The YouTube film presented on the extracted web page is part of a series of basic Tamazight courses (with a linguistic backdrop), which are mainly articulated in Kabyle Amazigh (North Algeria). Although these lectures deal specifically with the Kabyle language, the website editors and the e-lecturer present them as 'general Tamazight' (*Cours de l'Amazigh*, *Timsirin n Tmazight*, *Cours de Berbère*, meaning 'courses of Tamazight').

In fact, no unified or standard Tamazight for the Amazigh language family as a whole has yet been 'officially' agreed, whether based on the Latin, Arabic or Tifinagh (ancient Amazigh graphemes) writing systems.[14] Their labelling as pan-Amazigh indicates the desire of the

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[14] But local initiatives do exist in North Africa and its diaspora. For example, the Moroccan IRCAM (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe) in Rabat is currently working on one standard Amazigh language for the whole of Morocco based on the Tifinagh writing system. And, in the diaspora, the 'Réseau International pour l'Aménagement de la Langue Berbère' has been created in 1998 at the INALCO (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales) in Paris. This network has developed a general Latin-based notation system, drawing on the long tradition of writing and standardising Kabyle Amazigh in the Latin alphabet. The agreed writing system is widely followed by Kabyle people both in the diaspora and in Algeria. The INALCO notation system also served as a basis for standardising the orthography of Tarifit (North Morocco; see Lafkioui 1999, 2000), to which end a special international workshop-debate was held in the Netherlands (Utrecht, November 1996; see Lafkioui 1997).

interactants to pass on the Amazigh heritage (language and culture) in the so-called 'modern' social and cultural format invested with literacy and language homogeneity.

Example 2. *Extract from the multilingual Amazigh website 'amazighWorld.org'*[15].
< http://www.amazighworld.org/studies/index_show.php?id=2170>

This purpose is also clearly observable during the talks through which the e-teacher constantly employs 'Amazigh' neologisms so as to construct distinctive meta-linguistic content and educational argumentative structure. Interestingly, some of the neologistic expressions in Tamazight are reformulated in French for cognitive (e.g. memorisation) as well as interactive (e.g. seeking and keeping attention) purposes. In addition, these French reformulation practices allow for continuous verification of the ways in which the discourse objects (i.e. language features of Tamazight) are categorised and denominated (meta-communicative function).

As a result, the presentation of Tamazight as a 'unified' and 'written' 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 (e.g. see text on the white board in the YouTube image of figure 2) 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 writing system is a significant contender in the Amazigh orthography debate (Lafkioui 2002, 2008b, 2011c, 2013). The fact that the Moroccan IRCAM (Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe) has opted for Tifinagh characters for their literacy practices has had a certain impact on the direction of the orthography dynamics of the Amazigh languages in North Africa and its diaspora, as is revealed in the following YouTube excerpt from the same website (example 3) and some related comments posted afterwards by the interactants (example 4).

This videotape (example 3) aims at instructing how to pronounce and to write Tifinagh

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[15] This website is highly multilingual, as is reflected in its edited sections, which contain texts presented in four different interfaces (Tamazight, French, English and Arabic), and its user sections, which involve interactions in Spanish and Dutch as well. However, the French interface is the most updated and developed one, and French is the focal language of most CM interactions.

characters according to the IRCAM-system, which is an adapted (viz. simplified) version of the notation systems used for millennia by the Tuareg people (mainly living in the Sahara area) and which, therefore, is usually called a 'neo-Tifinagh' alphabet. Interestingly, a written text in French appears simultaneously with the Amazigh voice and the neo-Tifinagh graphemes, indicating the approximate pronunciation of each grapheme by analogy with the French alphabet and its associated expressions. Consequently, French functions here as a meta-communicative device assisting in the acquisition of the Amazigh language, even if the respective phonetic and phonological systems do not correspond.

Example 3. *Extract of a subpage of the site 'amazighworld.org'.*
<http://www.amazighworld.org/studies/index_show.php?id=2171>

Despite the risks of linguistic inconsistencies, due to discordant cognitive associations between French and the Amazigh languages, these types of 'heteroglossic'[16] practices are very common on the French-based Amazigh websites, partly because of the well-established historical and sociocultural links between France and North Africa.[17]

Additionally, French as the default CM resource of these websites allows for accommodation through meta-linguistic recontextualisation, which is indispensable for successful content transmission among their non fluent and ethnically diverse participants.

The instrumental function of French, in contrast with Tamazight's highly iconic function, is also clearly observable in the following comments (example 4, < http://www.amazighworld. org/studies/index_show.php?id=2171>) regarding the You Tube film of example 3.

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[16] Heteroglossia is understood here in the broader sense of Ivanov (2001) (based on Bakhtin (1981)), where both forms and contents are concerned in the analysis of their concurrent and different use within one text.
[17] Most videos offering instruction in the learning of Tamazight are in French on the French-based Amazigh websites, but there are also sites like 'amazighWorld.org', which offer Amazigh courses with English as the base language. Once again, the international dimension of English serves the Amazigh claim both on a social level – it renders it internationally more visible and acceptable – and on an interactive level, because it becomes accessible to a wider and diverse public.

Example 4[18]
Les commentaires
Important :Prière noter que les commentaires des lecteurs représentent les points de vue de leur auteurs et non pas d'AmazighWorld; et doivent respecter la déontologie, ne pas dépasser 6 à 10 lignes, critiquer les idées et non pas les personnes, êtres constructifs et non destructifs et dans le vif du sujet.

N°: 6--- Pour ce bourrique d'Ageznay!
Le Tifinaγ IRCAmien est plus que la merde mon cher baudet qui ne connaît rien sur l'histoire de ce vieux Afaniγ = Alphabet. Le vrai Tifinaγ est celui des ***Imuhaγ*** ('Tuareg people') qui est adopté par l'INALCO, quant à celui des tourniquets IRCAmiens dont tu fais partie il est expressément modifié, déformé, et falsifié dans le but d'isoler Imaziγen d'***Amurakkuc*** ('Marrakech' > 'Morocco') de leur vraie écriture et la remplacer par des desseins insensés et insignifiants. Notre ***Dda*** ('honorific title) Lmulud a déjà tranché de la transcription propice pour l'écriture de notre Langue TAMAZIΓT. Inutile mon cher bourricot de nous proposer tes vermicelles nauséabondes et moribondes de l'IRCAm = l'***Irkan*** ('trash') = l'***Ixxan*** ('total garbage') = l'***Iẓẓan*** ('shit') […]
Par: Accad Le : 2010-08-09

N°: 11--- vive imazighen
assa adhatcha tarwa n thamzgha ('Today (and) tomorrow, sons of Tamazgha!')
Par: krimo mazigh Le : 2011-06-07

N°: 12--- demande
je suis amazighe et je veux prendre ma langue matèrnel et aussi son écriture tifinaghe. prière de m\'envoyé comment?
Par: Hassan Le : 2011-06-25

N°: 14--- un peu de respect SVP
⁕⁕⁕⁕⁕ⴰⵊⴲⴴ ⵅⵀⵏⴰⵍⴾ⁕⁕⁕⁕⁕ ('Hello, all of you'.)
je n aime pas lire certains commentaires qui manquent du respect
si qlq un a une critique judicieuse et constructive, il est le bienvenu, dans le but d améliorer la cause de tamazigh
[…] je ne vois pas pkoi emprunter un autre alphabet alors qu on a déjà le notre , et même si certains dénigrent de tifinagh , il faut doubler d effort pour améliorer cet alphabet propre a tamazigh. […] tifinagh c est l alphabet naturel de tamazight
ayouz imazighen n tamazgha ('Well done, Imazighen of Tamazgha.')
omathwam amazigh zi Canada ('Your Amazigh brother from Canada')
Par: amazigh n tamsaman Le : 2011-08-03

N°: 19--- ***ta9baylit*** ('Kabyle woman/girl')
nekke ta9baylit yerna hemlagh atas tadartiw [unclear language use] ***hemlagh*** [unclear language use] ***gharagh tamazight*** et je suis fière de ma longe. ('I am a Kabyle girl/woman and I love my village a lot […]. I love […] to learn Tamazight').
Par: yamina Le : 2012-04-26

N°: 22--- Hola a todas, soy andaluza y llevo sagnre amazig sin dudas, lo descubred la primera vez que visite9 Marruecos […]
Par: Donna Le : 2012-08-23

N°: 23--- ***amazigh b?ni snassen*** ('Amazigh [from] Bni Iznasen')
j\'ai constaté que notre langue maternelle est différente de celle utilisée par les manuels de l\'institut,très souvent en utilisant le tifinagh,je n\'arrive pas à comprendre tous les termes du lexique, car différents des nôtres.
Pouvez vous me conseiller? Cordialement
Par: Redouane Le : 2012-11-15

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[18] The original text of the thread of example (4) is presented here, but in order to improve its readability, diacritics have been added, that on the referenced site, for some reason, appear only as question marks. For the sake of conciseness, only text in Tamazight (rendered by myself in italic and bold) is translated into English.

N°: 24--- Tifinagh berber
Bonjour,
Je viens de découvrir une application sur l\'App Store qui s\'appelle Tifinagh Berber
[…] L'application permet d'écouter l'alphabet, les mots, les phrases en berber et contient le clavier Tifinagh que vous pouvez utiliser pour envoyer un mail avec des caractères tifinagh et pleins d'autres fonctionnalités.
Je vous met le lien itunes ci-dessous
https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/tifinagh-berber/id609061450?l=fr&ls=1&mt=8
Par: berber Le : 2013-03-06

The interaction work displayed in the excerpts in example (4)[19] exemplifies precisely how the Internet enables a space for negotiating the jointly and informally constructed Amazigh language and cultural norms and representations. As is shown in these extracts, Tamazight language is mostly rendered by non standardised Latin-based scripts adapted to Amazigh phonetics (Romanised version; e.g. posts nr. 11, 14 and 19 or what could be called *Unicode-Amazigh*; e.g. post nr. 6) or by Tifinagh graphemes represented as such (e.g. post nr. 14). As for all the other languages – mainly French, English and Spanish (in that order of prevalence) – the interactants follow the general CM writing tendency and employ 'respelling' (Shortis 2009), which is a much more flexible, creative and dynamic writing technique (including the use of logograms, syllabograms and phonetic spellings) than the respective standard orthographies.

Accordingly, these interactants actively contribute to the heteroglossic development of French writing (as well as English and Spanish writing) and its related norms and styles.[20] Their online practices also account for a diversification of the sociolinguistic representations allocated to French (among other Western languages). In fact, CMC reframes French away from an asymmetric system in which it takes a dominant and normative position towards a more symmetric system in which its sociolinguistic functions are locally negotiated and assessed, hence engendering a 'more multi-centred sociolinguistic culture' (Coupland 2009).

In contrast, users of minority languages with no official standard orthography and grammar like Tamazight pay much attention to writing norms during their CM practices (edited texts and user exchanges), not only for online interactive purposes but also for the sake of group-specific ideologies that go in parallel with the offline contexts. Even if the norms thereby created are informal, unstable and often with an amateurish or impressionistic backdrop, they are significant in that they are the product of a debate in which the Amazigh languages are regarded as great cultural capital. Any use of these languages, whether formulaic or creative, is highly indicative of Amazigh identity and serves, even indirectly, the construction of inter-subjective spaces that support the Amazigh claim. In fact, the debate itself, including conflicts such as those performed in example (4), indexes the Amazigh languages as vital cultural capital. And as such, their acquisition is strongly valued and valorised (see e.g. posts nr. 12, 19, 23, 24). Moreover, the use of Tamazight within a French macro-text (as in example 4) indexes its key as Amazigh and so overrides French's automatically dominant position in its reading.

On the other hand, although there is space for negotiating Amazigh language and cultural norms and representations, the Amazigh websites function as an 'attributive centring institution' (Silverstein 1998) and 'gate-keeping' apparatus (Gumperz 1982), regulating to some degree the language and cultural features, functions and contextualisation. As the

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[19] Which are a representative sample of a long series of multilingual exchanges of which the first dates from 2010-07-27 and the last one (number 24) examined in this study dates from 2013-03-06.
[20] The connection between style and language dynamics is in need of more study; see Gadet (2006) for an interesting contribution to this topic.

initiating note *Important* of example (4), as well as several of the succeeding comments, demonstrates, basic consensus is informally assured by the interactants themselves (editors, moderators and users), who mutually compose and recompose these websites' forms and contents. Regardless of the geographical, ethnic, social, historical and political diversity of the Imazighen and their claim, their recent unified ideological movement has engendered the appearance of a very recent postcolonial native ethnic group, the *pan-Amazigh* or simply the *Amazigh*, which is supported by a very novel trans-national, pan-Amazigh collective identity, widely promoted by means of the new media. Pan-Amazigh and local Amazigh identities do not usually enter into competition with each other; they rather empower each other. Pan-Amazigh identity provides the local identities with a powerful ideological instrument against hegemonic forces; i.e. Western social and economic domination and Arab-Islamic cultural domination. Local Amazigh identities, instead, endow this huge virtual apparatus which is *pan-Amazighness* with cultural and historical content, of importance for its social and political legitimation.

In ways like this, the Amazigh language is an essential aspect of Amazigh group identity, constructed in opposition to state hegemony, whether in North Africa or in the diaspora. And yet, this oppositional language-ideological alternative matches the hegemonic ideologies of linguistic and cultural exclusivity and modernity (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004). Moreover, even if the 'Amazigh community' concept is fostered on French-based Amazigh websites, the in vivo computer-mediated exchanges (see examples), and hence their interrelated identity-constructing practices too, are mostly bilingual or multilingual.

7. Conclusions

In contrast with other diaspora websites (Androutsopoulos 2006b), Amazigh websites are keen to combat the functional marginalisation of online Tamazight, which is generally induced by a lack of linguistic competencies on the part of the non fluent and ethnically diverse participants. Linguistic and interactive shortcomings in Tamazight, mostly observable in the user sections because of their dynamic and creative nature, are compensated for by all sorts of accommodation processes in which meta-linguistic recontextualisation (often in French), made possible by the reflexive nature of language, plays a pivotal role. Moreover, a considerable part of the edited sections is devoted to multimodal texts in Tamazight – especially traditional literature – which are usually translated into French and other Western languages for interactive and trans-local reasons. However, even if the valorisation of certain Amazigh traditional literary genres and productions on the French-based Amazigh websites may have a specific identity claiming and constructing purpose, their reproduction as cultural 'heritage' corresponds to the hegemonic ideological discourses of cultural exclusivity and modernity (Lafkioui 2008a).

As it is the Amazigh languages which primarily define Amazigh group identity – for social, political and historical reasons –, any language other than Tamazight is excluded from online challenging discourses about Amazigh identity (e.g. example 4), even though the interactional practices themselves are performed in the functionally dominant language of the website in question (French in this case). Therefore, in accordance with the offline face-to-face context (Lafkioui 1998, 2006, 2011a, 2013), the language choice of the Amazigh interactants on the French-based Amazigh websites is highly ethnicised when it comes to taking a stance – usually in opposition to various hegemonic forces in North Africa and the diaspora – and, thus, explicitly expressing their ethnic and cultural identity. However, a great deal of CMC reveals a continuous negotiation between the interactants about the multiple codes and choices which allow them to position themselves in the interactive space, and hence to adhere to or oppose certain ethnic, cultural and social identity discourses. For many Internet

interactants visiting these websites, the Amazigh language is merely a collective symbol of Amazigh identity, signified by semiotic devices such as specific ethnic-related screen-names (e.g. historical Amazigh proper names, village names of the homeland in North Africa), well chosen Amazigh traditional literary expressions or emblematic phrases used as post signatures and local Amazigh or pan-Amazigh greetings and closings.[21] Besides their iconising function, these semiotic markers also allow for a more personalised and nuanced self-presentation.

During multilingual user interactions on French-based Amazigh websites, 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, even if conflict may occur. The CM context permits this negotiation of jointly (re)created identities – representations of the Self and the Other – from a symmetrical and relatively more convenient interactional position.

However, the Amazigh websites are institutionalised contexts which regroup different institutionalised genres within a wider trans-local 'institutional discursive regime' (Fairclough 1992). They are flourishing discursive fora hosting group-specific-ideologies, some of them visible through symbolic group identity markers, others invisible because of their all-embracing features. The Internet is thus 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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[21] In contrast with Androutsopoulos' (2006b) findings for German-based diaspora websites, the Amazigh interactants often explicitly refer to ethnic and regional origin in their formulaic language use (e.g. screen-names and signatures).

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