Some Cultural and Linguistic Issues in the Standardization of Tamazight in Algeria

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Aitsislemi, F. 2001. Some cultural and linguistic issues in the standardization of Tamazight in Algeria. The Linguistic Association of Korea Journal 9(1). 73-94. The aim of this article is to examine the sociolinguistic situation in Algeria with special reference to Tamazight, the indigenous language spoken in North Africa and to review the factors which led to the decision to use the Roman alphabet to transcribe Tamazight. Tamazight has yet to be recognised as a national language by the Algerian constitution but a number of events in the recent history of the country have resulted in some official recognition of the language and the setting up of institutions in charge of the promotion of Tamazight with a view to introducing it as a medium of education at least in the areas where it is used as a mother tongue. Tamazight being a spoken language its introduction in the educational system requires a process of standardization the first step of which is its codification and the selection of an alphabet to transcribe it. The article examines some cultural and linguistic issues which have to be taken into consideration in the choice of a system to transcribe a language with no previous written tradition, and to explore the problems raised by its transcription once an alphabet has been chosen. (The University of Bradford)

1. The Tamazight language

The Tamazight group of languages is traditionally known as Berber. Historically, this term has been used to refer to the first inhabitants of Algeria and originally it meant foreigner, uncivilised or non-Greek/Latin speakers. Therefore this term has been felt to have pejorative connotations because it derives from a Greek root related to Barbarian. Berber-speaking people use regional names (for instance: 'Aqbayli' from
Kabylia in North Western Algeria) or tribal names (for instance: 'Ashawi' on the Saharan Atlas Mountains) to refer to themselves. They do not describe themselves as Berbers. This latter is nowadays perceived as 'a foreign label given to the indigenous population by various invaders of North Africa' (Ferkal, 1996).

Amazigh (where 'gh' represents a voiced uvular fricative) meaning noble or free man is the term which is considered to designate Berbers in general. Its plural is Imazighen (by addition of plural affixes) and its feminine form, Tamazight, (by addition of feminine affixes) refers to the language. It is now accepted as a generic term by all scholars as well as the forty associations gathered under the Amazigh World Congress founded in France in 1995. It is also accepted by the younger generation and can be found in many recent poems and songs as the signal of a sense of belonging to a larger cultural community beyond the tribe or the region, a feeling which was lacking among the older generation.

Linguistically Tamazight is classed in the same group as Semitic languages either as a sub-branch, of a Hamito-semitic or Chami-to-semitic family in the French tradition (Chaker, 1993) or next to Semitic in the Afro-Asiatic group (Greenberg, 1955) next to Ancient Egyptian, Chadic and Cushitic. Tamazight is spoken on a very large territory in North Africa, from the oasis of Siwa in the Egyptian western desert through to Morocco and from the Mediterranean coast in the north, to the Sahara into Niger and Mali. The Canary Islands are said to constitute its westernmost limit although the language has been extinct there since the 19th century. This area of over five million squared kilometres spreads over ten countries. But linguistically Tamazight does not constitute a continuous zone; Tamazight-speaking areas are surrounded by Arabic-speaking populations who constitute the linguistic majority in North Africa.

The number of Tamazight speakers ranges from a few thousands (in the oasis of Siwa) to very densely populated areas in Algeria and Morocco. Statistics concerning language speakers vary because in population censuses in Algeria do not take into consideration linguistic