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WRITING "SHELHA" IN NEW MEDIA: EMERGENT NON-ARABIC LITERACY IN SOUTHWESTERN ALGERIA¹

Lameen Souag

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is and always has been a rather common situation worldwide, perhaps especially in Africa, for a community to speak one language but write in another, a phenomenon termed "exographia" by Lüpke (forthcoming). In such cases, orthographic conventions for the spoken language are likely to arise more or less spontaneously as writers find occasions to write words in it. Yet, while the orthographic traditions of many languages using the Arabic or Latin scripts are likely to have begun in this manner, the emergence of such conventions, and the contexts in which writers feel the need for them, have received relatively little attention.

Southwestern Algeria (defined here as the Saharan wilayas of Tindouf, Bechar, En Naama, El Bayadh, and Adrar) is a multilingual region in which the primary language of literacy is overwhelmingly, and has long been, Standard Arabic. Its indigenous tradition of Arabic literacy in the Maghrebi script through Quranic schools has (as elsewhere in Algeria) been expanded and to a large extent supplanted since 1962 by universal state-administered education using the pan-Arab Nashī script. In contrast to some other regions of Algeria, competence in French is relatively limited. As a result of these factors, speakers of non-Arabic languages in the region show a strong tendency to resort to Arabic transcriptions for their languages rather than Latin ones. Local and national linguistic ideologies tend to limit the use of these languages in the traditional domains of literacy; however, in recent years some speakers have taken advantage of new domains, in particular mobile phones and the Internet, creating an unprecedented new corpus of written material. The script chosen is frequently Arabic; besides being the default written language for most people in the region, it has the advantage of

¹ [In the transcription of "Shelha", the following special characters (with their IPA equivalents) are used: *z* /z^ʕ/, *d* /d^ʕ/, *t* [t^ʕ], *r* /r^ʕ/, *z* /z/, *š* /ʃ/]

distinguishing many phonemes widely found in regional languages (notably pharyngeals and emphatics) which are not distinguished in the only other familiar orthography, French. The orthographic practices emerging as a result, and the contexts in which they are used, provide insights with broader applicability to the emergence of grass-roots first language literacy. The lessons they have to offer should be useful to language planning and teaching for the region.

1.1. Sociolinguistic situation

The dominant spoken language of southwestern Algeria is Maghrebi Arabic; Hassaniya Arabic is also widely spoken around Tindouf. Several distinct Berber varieties are spoken alongside Arabic (Galand 2002): Taznatit in the Gourara region around Timimoun and sporadically further south (Boudot-Lamotte 1964; Mammeri 1984; Bellil 2006); in the upper Saoura valley and the Ksour Mountains, a number of closely related Zenati varieties collectively known in older linguistic literature as "kçours du sud-oranais" (Kossmann 2010); and the more distantly related Tamasheq (transcriptions here are based on Heath 2006), spoken by the traditionally nomadic Tuaregs around Reggane, Adrar, and In-Salah. In addition to these, in Tabelbala a heavily Berber-influenced Songhay language is spoken: Kwarandzyey (or Korandje.) All of these non-Arabic languages (with the partial exception of Tamasheq) are indifferently termed *šəlħa* "Shelha".

For native speakers of Arabic, practically all spoken interactions involve the same language. For native speakers of any Shelha, on the other hand, there is a clear diglossic functional division. Shelha is spoken with and around "insiders", people from the same village or community; Arabic, with and around "outsiders", making it the default choice for city life, as well as a prerequisite for formal jobs and dealing with the government or the educational system. When Arabs are present, the default choice is Arabic; using Shelha in such contexts is commonly assumed to be – and often is – intended to keep secrets from the listeners. This latter function is strongly developed in many towns, where "cryptic" non-Arabic argot words may be substituted for Arabic loanwords such as the higher numerals specifically to achieve the goal of secrecy. The default status of Arabic means that, for almost all Shelha-speaking communities, fluency in spoken Arabic is taken for granted, not just for adults but usually for children as well; it is the normal language of interaction with officials, primary school teachers, traders, travellers, or strangers in general, and the lingua franca of the cities. In some areas, such as Tabelbala, Igli, and Tamentit, Maghrebi Arabic has become the first language of the younger generation, as speakers abandon their mother tongues in the hope of giving their children a head start.

1.2. Literacy transmission

Since the pre-colonial era, Arabic literacy in the Maghrebi script has been transmitted at an elementary level by Qur'ānic schools, found in almost every town and attended by children. These use traditional methods of reciting sections of the Qur'ān together and having the children write the text on erasable wooden tablets (*lawḥ*); naturally, their primary focus is on the Qur'an, rather than on the details of grammar or text production. Religious higher education in the zaouias was and is available for those interested, mainly would-be religious functionaries (*talābs* in local Arabic), but often requires travel. This traditional education system generated a number of major manuscript collections. These have been documented for the Touat-Gourara region by Bouterfa (2005), and are also found along the Saoura valley (eg at Kenadsa, Kerzaz, Beni-Ounif; Nadjah (2009)) and in the Ksour Mountains (as at Tiout, cf. APS (2006).) The content of such libraries appears to be overwhelmingly in Arabic; however, Bouterfa notes the existence of non-Arabic manuscripts in several locations, including Adrar, Lemtarfa, and by implication Maghili. The question of their language and content would be an interesting topic for further investigation. However, the pre-colonial tradition of writing non-Arabic languages in Arabic script that these may represent, if it ever existed, appears unlikely to have left much impact on the new orthographic practices discussed below – if only because the traditional educational system, while still active, is overwhelmingly outnumbered by the new state system.

Following Independence, a network of state schools was established; these are now attended by virtually all children, and are mandatory up to 9th grade. High school is not always available locally in the smallest settlements, requiring some students to board. The primary language of school is Arabic; Maghrebi Arabic is often used as a language of instruction, particular at early stages, alongside Standard Arabic and to a much lesser extent French. Literacy in Standard Arabic, using the pan-Arab *nashī* script, is a key goal of education, and to a lesser or greater extent is almost universally attained; literacy in French (and sometimes English) is also taught, but is much more limited in practice.

Since 1995, Berber has been taught in Algerian schools. However, in practice this is of minimal relevance to the region under discussion, and indeed to most of the country. Regional attitudes towards the idea of teaching Berber are ambivalent; a study of language attitudes in one of the Berber-speaking towns of the Ksour Mountains, Bousseghoun (Benali 2004), revealed a narrow majority (52%) in favour of teaching Berber, yet the town rejected the installation of an office of the *Haut Comité de l'Enseignement de la langue tamazight*, apparently distrusting its politics. As of March 2004, only 16 out of Algeria's 48 wilayas had schools offering any Berber classes (N. H. & S. C. 2009); of these, only one, El Bayadh, is located in the southwest, and there "l'intérêt suscité à l'égard de cet enseignement au début a diminué et après un temps assez court, il s'est éteint

entièrement"² (R. N. 2009). At no point, therefore, are state school students taught any orthography specifically designed for Berber, much less Songhay. (Even in the short-lived exception of El Bayadh, centrally created Berber teaching materials are more likely to reflect the significantly different Kabyle Berber language than to be close to the local Zenati varieties, reducing their potential impact.)

Very few works have been published containing texts in the languages of the region; of those few, most are intended for an academic audience rather than for speakers of the languages, and most use Latin script. For Figuig (just across the border in Morocco) a recent dictionary, grammar, and text collection using the Arabic script exists (Sahli 2008), but this work is not readily available in Algeria. The possibility of published works spreading a particular orthography is thus negligible.

How, then, do speakers react to a new domain for literacy?

2. WRITING "SHELHA" IN NEW TECHNOLOGIES

2.1. *The corpus*

The use of Shelha online can be observed on a number of public forums – sites where the readers need not necessarily know the writer. This appears particularly common on regional forums, including:

Youth of Adrar (shababadrar.net)
 Sirat Scout Troop Igli (siratigli.yoo7.com)
 Igli Township Forums (igli08.com)
 Tinerkouk Youth Forum (tinerkouk.banouta.net)
 At Bousseghoun (bousseghoun.com)
 Djelfa Forums (djelfa.info)

However, examples can also be found on national or international forums, such as En Nahar Online (forum.ennaharonline.com), 4Algeria (4algeria.net), and Rehab Maroc (rehabmaroc.com), and sporadically on blogs, such as Aougrout (aougrout.blogspot.com). A total of 42 webpages from these sites were examined, yielding 389 examples from Igli, 149 from Bousseghoun, 100 for Tamasheq, and 92 for Taznatit.

For its use in the private sphere, my data is limited to Tabelbala; there, it includes emails, Skype chats, Facebook messages, and, perhaps most commonly, text messages, as well as notes to me written in my notebook. This data was collected in the course of fieldwork supported by the AHRC; I am grateful to it and to the people I worked with.

2 “The interest initially aroused regarding this teaching diminished, and after a rather short time, it was entirely extinguished.”

2.2. Orthographic practices

While the phonological system of regional Berber and Songhay languages overlaps substantially with Arabic, a number of phonemes have no clear Standard Arabic counterpart, forcing the adoption of orthographic strategies not taught in school.

g is most commonly written as *qāf* (ق):

Kwarandzyey اقى PAST (*aggā*), عقرقي I fought (*ʃa-ggʷargʷay*)

Taznatit دقيص night (*daggid*), تمقى head (*tamagna*)

Igli ازقاع red (*azaggay*), تمقا head (*tamagna*)

Boussemghoun تامزقيدة mosque (*taməzɡida*)

Tamasheq إقلا he went (*igla*)

This choice reflects widespread Algerian practice. *g*, while absent from Standard Arabic, is phonemic in Maghrebi Arabic as well as in Berber and Songhay, and in most cases reflects an etymological *q*. In personal names and placenames, *g* is normally transcribed for official purposes as *q* or as *qāf* with three dots above, as can readily be seen on road signs. The latter alternative is difficult to type, since it is not present on most keyboards available; however, I have observed it in handwritten examples, eg Kwarandzyey بَمَشْتَا we pray (*yə-m-gəngə*). Nowhere in the corpus examined were any cases found of *g* being transcribed as *kāf* ك or as *gāyn* غ, or variations thereon. This contrasts strikingly with the practice of both nearby Morocco to the north and Mali to the south, where *g* is normally transcribed as *kāf* ك with three dots (Boogert 1997; Sudlow 2001).

z is typically transcribed as *zāy* ز, as is also common in Algerian practice; for example:

Taznatit: امزيان small (*aməzyan*), تبلكوزت [plant sp.] (*tabəlkuzt*)

Igli: (بتفخيم الزين) لزي gallbladder (*izi*), تمزوغين ears (*timəzzuyin*)

Boussemghoun ازور root (*azwər*)

Tamashek: اكوژ four (*əkkoz*)

Rather more surprisingly from an Algerian perspective, however, there are also rarer instances where it is transcribed *ḏā'* ظ:

Tamashek: امظادن hair (*amzadān*)

Taznatit: ظال pray (*zall*), لاظ hunger (*laz*)

The pronunciation *z* for *ظ* is common in Egyptian pronunciations of Standard Arabic, so this may reflect Middle Eastern influence. However, Kossmann & Elghamis (this volume) observe the same phenomenon elsewhere in Tuareg, so it may reflect a wider southern Saharan tradition.

Outside of Tabelbala, attested renderings of affricates follow the common Algerian strategy of separating them into two consonants:

Igli اهتشا tomorrow (*ahətša*)

Boussemghoun ميتش seven (*mits*)

In Tabelbala, however, regular sound shifts have turned historic *t / d* into *ts / dz* in many contexts, and the shift of *t* to *ts* is shared with Arabic as spoken in the regional centre Bechar. For *ts*, the etymologically correct *tā'* ت is thus consistently preferred, eg ايتي they said (*i-ttsi*). However, for *dz* local Arabic offers no exact equivalent. Some speakers prefer etymological *dāl* د, which does not permit the affrication to be distinguished, eg ندوغ so that (*ndzuγ*); one even added three dots underneath to permit the distinction, writing فأننينا put down here (*g^wā-tā-ndza*). Others, however, prefer to write *tā'* ت, thus sacrificing the voicing in order to represent the affrication: أنتاني and you (*ndza ni*), تفتي you did (*nā-ddza*), لفقرتسي the key to which (*lāqfār=dz=si*).

Of the languages under discussion, labiovelarisation carries a significant phonemic load only in Kwarandzyey – and there, younger semi-speakers typically drop it. It may be left unmarked, eg كاراسي to Kwara (*k^wara=si*); marked only through vocalisation using a *dammah*, eg يتشس we slaughtered (*yā-qq^was*); or transcribed using a *wāw* و, reflecting its effects on the following vowel, eg كورا Kwara (*k^wara*).

Gemination is phonemic in Standard Arabic as in all the languages under discussion. However, while the Arabic script provides a ready-made way to handle them – the optional *šaddah* diacritic – the morphophonemics of Arabic motivates another way of writing word-initial coronal geminates: as *al-* ال plus the consonant geminated. All three of these possibilities are attested, although the commonest, as expected in unvocalised texts, is leaving it unmarked:

Unmarked (default option):

Taznatit طف grasp (*ttaf*)

Boussemghoun تَزْقُوه تَمَلَلْت white room (*tazəqqa taməllalt*), عاغان
shoulders (*iyallən*)

Shaddah:

Igli إيِّي daughter (*illi*)

Tamasheq اّام eight (*əttam*)

Initial ال (limited to Arabic loans in corpus):

Igli الجاوجة second (*žžawža*)

A fourth possibility is also discussed briefly, if scarcely used:

ولكن هناك من يرى أن كل ما ينضق يكتب بدون استثناء..... فالتشديد مثلا يكتب بدلا من وضع
حركة التشديد على الحرف..... مثل ما في كلمة : (إسرمغت) فالأصل إسرمغت -
azawazd

"But some consider that everything that is pronounced should be written without exception... so gemination for example would be written instead of by placing the *šaddah* marker on the letter... like the following word: إسرمغت (*issrmyt*), corresponding to original إسرمغت." - azawazd (<http://www.djelfa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=99925>)

Full vowels are almost always written plene when final or in an open penultimate syllable, and in many cases are written plene throughout:

Kwarandzyey مباحوراكا you have entered it (*n-ba-hhur a-ka*)

Igli أفردو pestle (*afərdu*), ايتقاما he sits (*itqama*)

Taznatit تغوني canal (*tiyuni*)

However, in closed syllables or position before the penultimate, they are often left unmarked:

Igli تمزغت ear (*taməzzuyt*)

Taznatit تمطوت woman (*taməttut*)

Kwarandzyey المطارك in the airport (*əlməṭar=ka*)

The schwa, etymologically corresponding in Maghrebi Arabic to the short vowels of Classical Arabic, is normally left unmarked:

Igli أفردو pestle (*afərdu*)

Taznatit سن two (*sən*)

In some cases, the strategies seen above are supplemented by vocalisation:

Kwarandzyey أَيَفْهَمُ he understands (*a-b-ifhām*)

Tamasheq تِكَادَيْتْ stone (*tekādāyt*)

Igli مِيلُوْزْ hungry person (*miluz*)

Boussemgoun تَزَقُّوْهَ تَمَالَتْ white room (*tazəqqa taməllalt*)

In such cases, schwa, with no single unambiguous counterpart in Standard Arabic, may be represented either by *fatḥa* or by *sukūn*:

Igli اَبْرَكَانْ summer (*anəbdu*), تَزَمْتْ road (*tizəmmt*), اَبْرَكَانْ black (*abərkan*)

Tamasheq اِشْتَاوْنْ sky (*išənnawān*)

Kwarandzyey تَمْرَفِيدَاَسْ to the mosque (*tsaməzɡida=s*), قَاتْنِيَا put down here (*g^wa-tə-ndza*)

Igli اَمْرَشِيدْ date pollen (*aməršid*), اِعْضْ ashes (*iγəd*)

Final *-a* is written in any of three ways; the distinction is morphologically motivated in Standard Arabic, but the relevant morphology corresponds to nothing in the Shelha being written:

-a = ي:

Kwarandzyey اِقِي PAST (*əgga*), نَبِيغِي on your head (*nən bəny=ka*)

Taznatit تَمَغْنِي head (*taməgna*), تَعَاطِي frond (*taɣaɥta*)

Igli اَغْنِي ladle (*aγənja*)

-a = ا:

Kwarandzyey اَعْقَارَانَا I found it (*ɣaggarana*), سَكَايِيكا on Skype (*skayb=ka*)

Taznatit اَدَا stone (*adɣa*)

Igli اَلدَسَا liver (*tsa*), اَهْتَشَا tomorrow (*ahətša*), تَمَغْنَا head (*taməgna*)

Tamasheq اَتَاغَا thigh (*tayma*)

-a = ة (rarer – nouns only?):

Kwarandzyey تَلَخْبَا how are you? (*təlləxbə*)

Igli اَغْرَدَا mouse (*aγərda*)

Boussemgoun تَامَزْقِيدَا mosque (*taməzɡida*)

What conclusions can be drawn? There are few if any signs of the stabilisation of community-specific norms; instead, the space of orthographic choices shows remarkable homogeneity across the region. The most consistent and widespread non-Standard Arabic conventions, notably ق for *g* and ز for *z*, apply throughout the region irrespective of language, and are precisely those which correspond to official usage in the transcription of personal names and placenames. Where Standard Arabic offers a range of different orthographic possibilities, all the main possibilities are attested in most of the languages examined. The absence of data on Arabic-script transcription in the traditional educational system makes it difficult to judge whether any continuity is present, but the use of ق for *g* suggests discontinuity; both in southern Morocco and in Mali, *g* is normally transcribed as گ, and, given the region's historical trade links with those areas, one would expect the same convention to have been original here. In general, it appears that community-specific orthographic norms are weak or nonexistent, and traditional education network norms are unlikely to be being reflected in new media practice; even though non-Arabic local languages are absent from education, the orthographic choices for them are being determined primarily by those of the state. The possible exception of ط for *z* would merit closer examination.

Another factor with a strong impact on orthographic choices is technical constraints, as also found elsewhere for instant messaging by Lee (2007). In hand-writing, the nature of the Arabic script facilitates the creation of new characters by adding dots; at least one such character, *gāf* ق, is familiar throughout Algeria, and others, such as *pā'* پ, are known more sporadically through contact with other countries. But, while many of these can be typed on a computer by a knowledgeable user, the average user is often unable, and even more often unmotivated, to type any character not found on a standard Arabic keyboard layout; and on a mobile, depending on the model, doing so may simply be impossible. Hence, though the new character strategy has several attestations in the small hand-written corpus, it has not a single attestation in the electronic one. A less conspicuous effect may be the paucity of vocalisation, in contrast with, for example, traditional manuscripts of the Sous (Boogert 1997); while this may reflect Modern Standard Arabic convention, it may also be linked to the fact that most keyboards used locally do not mark the location of vowel marks, and not all users realise that these can in fact be typed. In brief, the means of production affects the orthographic outcome.

2.2. *Why is Shelha written?*

2.2.1 *Public sphere: Metalinguistic usage*

In public contexts, where outsiders can potentially read it, Shelha is most widely written for metalinguistic purposes. One minor case is explaining place-names, in the context of local history:

سميت جل القصور بالمنطقة ككل من اصل بربري... قصر تيلكوزة: وتيلكوزت تعني نبات او عشبة العقة لما كانت ولا زالت تكثر بهذه المنطقة خاصة منطقة آعاد (طاهري ع،
(<http://tinerkouk.banouta.net/montada-f139/topic-t127.htm>)

Most ksours in the area all have names of Berber origin... Tabelkoza: *tabəlkuzt* means the *ṣagga* plant/herb, because it was and is common in this area, especially around Aghad. (Tahri A, 22/12/2008 – Taznatit)

أوسع حجرة في الزاوية فهي الحجرة المسماة تَزْقُوه تَمَلَالْتْ و معناها بالعربية الغرفة البيضاء)

http://www.boussemgoun.com/ar/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=50&Itemid=58

The biggest room in the zaouia is the room called *tazəqqa taməllalt*, which means "the white room" (Boussemgoun)

The commonest purpose overall, however, is teaching to non-speakers. In several cases, the target audience is Arabic speakers, usually from the same broad region, often finding an audience:

اخواني اخواتي اعضاء منتدى شباب ادرار يسرني ان اشارككم ببعض الكلمات من اللهجة التارقية منبع اللهجت البربرية. من تعلم لغة قوم امن شرهم (الرجل الأزرق،
(<http://www.shababadrar.net/vb/showthread.php?t=41444>)

Brothers and sisters, members of the Adrar Youth Forum, I am pleased to share with you some words from the Tuareg dialect, the wellspring of the Berber dialects. He who learns a people's language is safe from their evil. (Blue Man, 04/09/2009)

السلام عليكم الاخوت وردة الصحراء نعم يمكن ان نعلمك اللهجة الزناتية وعلى الرحب والسعة مادمت جادة ولديك رغبة في ذلك وشكرا.أويد فوسنم = هاتي يدك (، mahlal،
(<http://www.djelfa.info/vb/showthread.php?t=155827>)

Salam alaykum sister "Desert Rose". Yes we can teach you the Zenati dialect, with welcome and generosity, as long as it's serious and you long to do it, and thank you. *Awid fus-ənnəm* = Give us your hand. (mahlal, 21/10/2009)

Occasionally the target audience includes other Berber speakers: in the example below, a Semghouni replies to a post listing words in Tashelhiyt of the Sous (Morocco) adding Semghouni equivalents:

أمزِيلُ = الحداد = ناض... هذه اللهجة تاشلحييت (بوسمغون) الجزائر (, algoun,)
 (http://www.rehabmaroc.com/vb/showthread.php?p=120202
Amzil [Moroccan] = blacksmith = *nad* [Boussemghoun]... This is the Tashelhiyt dialect of Boussemghoun, Algeria (algoun, 09/02/2010)

More rarely, the target audience is other speakers of the same language. Sporadic cases are attested for Boussemghoun, notably the posts of brahim1664, explaining rare Berber words in terms of more familiar ones, often loans, eg:

احموش = اغراف = تتلاخت = الفخار
ahmuš = *ayərɾaf* [ladle, < Ar.] *n tlaxt* = *alfəxxar* [pottery < Ar.]
 (28/07/2009)
 (http://www.boussemghoun.com/board/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=21&sid=5dfe40b1dfc444897f161f3674dace7f)

The only extensive example of this is Igli. The case of Igli is exceptional enough to deserve particular attention. Igli boasts a relatively active forum made for and by citizens of the town, started out by the local Scouts branch. At the same time, the "Shelha" Berber of Igli (*tabəldit*) is no longer spoken to children in many families, and younger Glaouis often have little or no command of it. Many forum members show a strong interest in recording and revitalising the language, primarily by teaching vocabulary:

أقدم إليكم اليوم هذا المشروع الذي ينص على إنشاء قاموس "عربية-شلحة" للحفاظ على هذا اللغة
 (شياء، (http://www.igli08.com/vb/showthread.php?t=862)

"I present to you today this project: the establishment of an "Arabic-Shelha" dictionary to preserve our language." (Shayma, 07/02/2009; as of 17 July 2010, the resulting dictionary, <http://www.igli08.com/vb/forumdisplay.php?f=82>, had attracted 193 postings.)

هذا الموضوع هو عبارة عن مجموعة من الحلقات فقي كل حلقة تقدم لكم مجموعة من الكلمات في لهجتنا الغالية والتي أستبدلت في عصرنا الحالي بأخرى سواءا فرنسية الأصل أو عامية. (عميور محمد،
 (http://siratigli.yoo7.com/montada-f12/topic-t270.htm)

"This topic will consist of a series of posts each presenting a set of words in our dear dialect which have been replaced in our times with others, whether French or dialectal Arabic." (Amiouer Mohamed, 27/08/2008)

One spin-off is the development of vocabulary competitions, allowing learners and semi-speakers to demonstrate their abilities:

من سيكون الراجح : أكبر كلمات بالشلحة مع معانيها (المشرف العام،

(<http://siratigli.yoo7.com/montada-f12/topic-t161.htm>)

"Who will win? Greatest Shelha words with their meanings" (Admin, 27/08/2008)

اشرح الكلمة: لواشون تغنجايث تقسريت (,bih20

(<http://www.igli08.com/vb/showthread.php?t=282>)

"Explain the word: *lwašun, taɣənjayt, taqəsrit*" (gives answers later) (bih20, 18/06/2009)

اتحدى كل اطياف المنتدى ان ياتوا بمعنى هذه الكلمة الشلحية. ارجو التفاعل ان كنتم شلحيين و

تدعون الشلحة: تمزراعيين (عبود بلخير، -[http://siratigli.yoo7.com/montada-](http://siratigli.yoo7.com/montada-f12/topic-t3455.htm)

(f12/topic-t3455.htm)

"I challenge all forum members to give the meaning of this Shelha word. Please respond if you are Shelha and considered Shelha:

timəzraʕin." (Abboud Belkheir, 17/06/2009)

Apart from vocabulary, efforts are also made to record and share proverbs:

حكم الشلحة لها تأثير ان ترجمت بالعربية نقص تأثيرها. و منها البداية ... شك ربي دنش أدنغا (عبد

الهادي بهاب، <http://siratigli.yoo7.com/montada-f12/topic-t347.htm>)

Shelha proverbs have an impact; if translated into Arabic, their impact lessens. So here's a start: *šək rəbbi d nəš ad nya*. (Abdelhadi Bahab, 31/08/2008)

قال القدامى القلاويين عن رمضان. "العشرة تامزوارت تون نيسان. لعشرة الجاوجة تون نلغان .

لعشرة تالته تون نغيال " ولقد اعتمدوا في تصنيفهم هذا على كيفية وسرعة مرور الايام خصوصا في

فصل الصيف. وترك لوملائنا الكرام شرف شرح هذا القول (, sarab

(<http://www.igli08.com/vb/showthread.php?t=7669>)

Glaoui old-timers used to say of Ramadan: "*lšašra taməzwarut tun n isan, lšašra žžawža tun n iləyman, lšašra ttalta tun n iyyal.*" They based their classification on the nature and speed of the passing of days especially in the summer. We leave to our respected comrades the honour of explaining this proverb. (sarab, 29/08/2009)

2.2.2 Private sphere: phatic communication

When private communications (email, Facebook, Skype chat, text messages, written notes) are examined, a quite different picture emerges. The corpus examined is limited to Tabelbala, but the messages consist overwhelmingly of greetings, inquiries after people's health and situations – phatic communication, in short, as in the following Facebook exchange (abridged):

السلام عليكم خبارك شوى يك ها سضانى...

Salam alaykum. How are you? No problems?...

بغنى هاسكى والو ايرش شوى او خلاصتهلى نمبغكى...

...No rain has fallen – it drizzled a little, that's all. Take care of yourself.

The use of the vernacular in such cases may be compared to the use of colloquial Arabic, not usually written, in similar contexts. as described for instant messaging in Gulf Arabic by Palfreyman & Khalil (2003).

3. CONCLUSIONS

The corpus examined suggests that "Ajami" writing is a natural side effect of Arabic literacy, which can show significant homogeneity across individuals and languages without the practice itself ever having been institutionally taught. It confirms that, in public contexts, Arabic remains the default choice, with "Shelha" reserved almost exclusively for presenting language-specific form rather than translatable meaning. At least for Tabelbala, on the other hand, it suggests that the sociolinguistic division of labour between Arabic and "Shelha" is partly replicated in written usage: in private communications, "Shelha" is used for phatic communication, and, while not the unmarked choice that it would be in comparable spoken contexts, can still be used to emphasise solidarity.

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