Notes on an Amazigh Argot

The *tagnawt* of the drummers of At Jennad (Western Kabylia, Algeria)

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This note provides a brief introduction to Tagnawt, a argot used exclusively by drummers from the At Jennad confederation in western Kabylia (Algeria). The matrix of this slang is Taqbaylit, the Amazigh language with the largest number of speakers in Algeria. This paper presents some sociolinguistic and linguistic features of this slang, a number of lexical items, its pronominal system and a few sentences.

1. Introduction[1]

The Amazigh-speaking world has several more or less complex argots, secret or insider languages,[2] which are used and transmitted by different social groups according to profession (Casajus 1989), gender (Ségéral and Lahrouchi 2010), religion (Mouliéras 1895), and so on. Some are used by the whole community, in order to be not understood by non-Amazigh-speaking outsiders (Vycichl 1969). In Kabylia, Daumas (1855) mentioned the existence of a criminal slang which he calls *Hotsia*. Hanoteau and Letourneux (1873) collected lexical data on three specimens of argots based on Taqbaylit Berber, each used by one of the following groups: the peddlers or itinerant merchants; the bards or poet-singers; the students or literate people who gave religious alms. In the preface to Gibran (2014), Allioui points out the existence in the past of two Kabyle slang languages, Tahuṭẓit spoken by members of brotherhoods, and Tamengawt practised by philosophers. The author speaks of these languages in the past tense and gives no examples of how they functioned, which suggests that they have disappeared.

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[1] Thanks to Hana El Shazli for proofreading a later version of this note. Any potential errors are my own.

[2] Also called cryptic languages, pseudo-languages, etc.

Since the 19th century, no study has investigated these Taqbaylit (=Kabyle)[3] Argot words or even reported their preservation until the present day. However, in 2016, Yani Saïd Ammar, a young man passionate about language and culture and particularly lexical research, made contact with a speaker of the specific Argot of the drum players (*iḏebbalen*)[4] of At Jennad: an important Taqbaylit-speaking confederation located in the northern region of the Djurdjura Moutains, in western Kabylia. They encountered each other in August 2016, and the speaker, who desired to remain anonymous,[5] sent a series of words by messaging again in December 2017 and May 2024.[6] Their language is called *Tagnawt*, it is known, daily used and transmitted by the drummers of the At Jennad confederation. As of right now, I am unsure if other confederations or professions, particularly artistic ones, also use it. According to the speaker, this Argot is used for not being understood when one wishes to criticize, make fun of, or make jokes about others without being understood. The speaker is a relatively young man who does not consider himself to be a good Tagnawt speaker, which would be much better mastered by older men. I have very little information on the sociology of Kabyle drum players, but it is an exclusively male activity, sometimes transmitted from father to son, and that, these players are often invited to weddings where they are paid for their performance[7].

In the corpus provided below, I have applied both the Latin graphic codification of Amazigh and the phonological transcription rules of Amazigh according to the norms of standard Algerian Amazigh. With one exception, since I have noted the labiovelarized [kʷ], since it forms a minimal pair with [k] in the examples of the corpus (cf. part 3, independent pronouns *srekʷᵉm* versus *srekᵉm)*. For each word or sentence spoken in Tagnawt, Yani Saïd Ammar asked for a translation into the speaker's Taqbaylit language, i.e. the At Jennad variety. In a few cases, the speakers provided only the translation of the Tagnawt word in French. It doesn't mean that there is no translation in Taqbaylit, but perhaps that the reality to which the word Tagnawt refers is generally expressed by the speaker in Tagnawt rather than

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[3] Taqbaylit is a Northern Amazigh language belonging to the Afroasiatic phylum. It is mainly spoken in Kabylia, in north-east Algeria, and by a large diaspora living in France, with an estimated total number of several million speakers.

[4] The drum is not the only instrument played by these musicians, but in Taqbaylit these troupes of male musicians who go to weddings are known as *iḏebbalen* 'drummers.'

[5] Because of this anonymity I will not be able to give any further details about this speaker and his activity as a musician.

[6] I'd like to thank Yani Saïd Ammar and our anonymous consultant for sharing this information about the Tagnawt with me and for trusting me to publish this note about it.

[7] I can't add anything more about the characteristics of this community and its musical genre, which have not yet been studied. What is more, Yani Saïd Ammar has told me that this is a fairly secretive community, so it is difficult to get to know it in depth even by conducting several interviews. That is why I proposed this paper as a note rather than an article. I can only give what little information I have, but I prefer to publish it as such, as I am not sure that I'll have access to more data in the future.

in Taqbaylit. I am only going to give a few dozen words of Tagnawt reported by a single speaker who says he does not have a good command of the slang; it is quite possible that there are many others.

2. The lexicon

Tagnawt is characterized by a number of lexical units that differ from those of the matrix (Taqbaylit). These lexical fields are relatively varied and include nouns, verbs and pseudoverbs. It is not surprising to find forms concerning instruments or money as well as forms that refers to animals (Basset 1887: 437); however, it is likely that these are frequently employed as comparatives or nicknames to designate humans because of some of their physical characteristics.

In Table 1. the boxes containing dashes correspond to words that the consultant has translated using periphrases for which we do not have an exact translation in the Kabyle dialect of the At Jennad.

Tagnawt	Taqbaylit	English
Nouns		
Identities		
agayiw	argaz	man
imiccer	aqcic	boy
acuta	tameṭṭut	woman
arabus	amrabeḍ	marabout
akʷermam	amɣar	old man
butarmact	bučamar	bearded religious man
aẓaluẓ	—	handsome young man
alxay	—	homosexual man
Anatomy		
adeɣnin	aqarru	head
afercel	afus	hand
lulet	tiṭṭ	eye
amasul	timeccacin	buttocks
akenzir	aḥeččun	vagina
amagget	abbuc	penis
Animals		
aɣendic	ilef	boar
imerriwec	ayaẓiḍ	rooster
tikicewt	taɣaṭṭ	goat
ajaluḍ	aɣyul	donkey
afenzer	azger	ox

muḥ u sliman	*amcic*	cat
Instruments		
taburzint	*tamekḥelt*	shotgun
taǧernezt	*lɣiḍa*	rhaita
ahendez	*ṭṭbel*	drum
taḥemḥumt	*ṭṭumubil*	car
aherwi	*axudmi*	knife
taburzint	*tamekḥelt*	shotgun
Food and drinks		
ilbasar	*aksum*	meat
ilgifi	—	sweet
leɛziz	*aman*	water
sebseb akuḥli	—	wine
Money		
larxel	*idrimen*	money
muḥ laxa	—	ten francs
Spaces		
dayma ~ amaqum	*axxam*	house
aderbuz	*lḥebs*	jail
Others		
tamaxalt	*tameɣra*	wedding
tasekraxt	*tamenyiwt*	murder
taḥeẓẓart	—	evil eye
Verbs		
rebbis	*ẓall*	to pray
zerret	*rwel*	to escape
umar	*meslay*	to speak
fella	*susem*	to shut
waxel	*derwec*	to use witchcraft
xecti	*dɣel*	to be bad
ateyyet	*uqqu*	to have sex
lxi	—	to get penetrated (man)
cmel	*ečč*	to eat
dummes	*ṭṭes*	to sleep
sekrex	*enɣ*	to murder
čiqqel	*efk*	to give
ḥẓer	—	to strike with the evil eye

Pseudoverbs		
(a)duban[8]	*lhu*	good
yekkuber	*aṭas*	a lot
amalul	*ulac*	nothing ~ it does not exist

Table 1. The corpus of Tagnawt lexicon

The Tagnawt lexicon is the result of a number of encryption processes, all of which are well known to North African argots:[9]

- different types of semantic shift sometimes linked to morphological changes: Taqbaylit *imcerri* 'wicked' (Dallet 1982: 484) ~ Tagnawt *imiccer* 'boy' (from the Arabic root ŠRR; cf. the Algiers dialect forms *šǝṛṛ* 'evil,' *šaṛīṛ* 'malevolent man'); Taqbaylit *egg* 'to fornicate' -> *ameggat* 'penis' (Haddadou 2007:181); Taqbaylit *kccc* 'shout to keep the goats away' (Dallet 1982: 392) -> Tagnawt *tikicewt* 'goat;' Taqbaylit *aderbuz* 'reduction, alley, trapdoor, tunnel' ~ Tagnawt 'jail;'

- the application of a particular scheme $aC^1aC^2uC^3$ for the production of nominal, as in *amaqum* house,' a term likely derived from Algerian Arabic *(lǝ-)mqām*, which in Taqbaylit gave *lemqam* 'sanctuary;'

- the mobilization of archaisms, such as *yekkuber* 'many,' a frozen verbal form derived from the native root KBR (cf. Tuareg *kubret* 'to be gathered en masse;' Haddadou 2007: 90-91), unproductive to my knowledge elsewhere in Taqbaylit. *Umar* 'to speak' is another example: it derives from the root RW (Haddadou 2007: 181) with the reciprocity prefix *m-*. To my knowledge, there are no other derivatives of this root with this prefix in Taqbaylit, while one finds in other Amazigh languages Ghadamès *mar* 'to be open, dilated, happy' and Tuareg *mar* 'to be open, spacious, sincere, intelligent' (Haddadou 2007: 181);

- the replacement by proper nouns, as in *muḥ laxa; Muḥ* being the typical Kabyle diminutive of the proper noun Muhammad;

- the replacement by an onomatopoeia, as in *taḥemḥumt* 'car,' probably formed from the onomatopoeia *ḥem ḥem* reproducing the sound of an engine;

- the permutation of a sound, noticeable in *ḥẓer* 'to cast the evil eye,' a verb originating in *xẓer* 'to look' (borrowed from the Arabic root ḤZR marked here by the change /x/ -> /ḥ/;

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[8] This pseudoverb varies in gender and number.

[9] Cf. Meouak and Kouici (2000) for the Algerian argots, and Berjaoui (1997) for some Moroccan argots.

- the inversion of syllables within the word, only in *butarmact*, composition of the qualifier *bu + tačamart/tacamart* (from the root CMR) 'beard' encrypted in *tarmact* (from the root RMC);

- the replacement by more or less transparent compositions, as with *sebseb akuḥli* 'alcohol' formed from the onomatopoeic word *sebseb* and the loanword *akuḥli* 'alcohol' (cf. Arabic *kuḥūl* 'alcohol');

- finally, certain forms seem to be constructed in the same way as taboo words can be: this is perhaps the case of *leɛziz* 'water,' whose meaning in the matrix is 'darling,' perhaps because the drummers prefer to be served other drinks when they are invited to parties? This is surely also the case of *dayma* 'house,' which is probably linked to the expression *axxam n dima* 'tomb' (literally 'home of forever'), which is frequently heard in Kabyle songs.[10]

If the majority of the forms noted can be attributed to these lexical encryption models, all well-known from the slangs of North Africa and even the world, some forms remain of unknown etymon such as *acuta*, *fella*, etc. We must consider these forms either as the origin of encryption models that I have not identified or even as origins borrowed from languages that I have not considered.[11]

3. The pronouns

In Tagnawt, independent pronouns (IP) are constructed from their equivalents in Taqbaylit, encrypted using three processes: the prefixation of /sr/, the dropping of a syllable/final consonant, or the replacement of the independent pronominal form of the matrix by its equivalent of the indirect object pronouns (IOP) series.

Unlike their equivalents in the matrix, the Tagnawt independent pronouns do not present emphatic elongated forms[12] and their gender oppositions do not operate for the same persons.

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[10] Yani Saïd Ammar's remark.

[11] I have been thinking about this, particularly since the discovery by my colleague Hana El Shazli of an Algerian community cryptic language containing Indo-Aryan lexical elements.

[12] Not included in the tables 2 and 3. In Taqbaylit, depending on the variety, these long forms can be used to provide emphatic support for the pronoun, or they may simply be free variants of the short form.

		Tagnawt (IP + IOP)	Taqbaylit IP	Taqbaylit IOP
Person	**Gender**	**Singular**		
1	Masculine	*sreni*	*nekk*	*inu ~ iw*
	Feminine			
2	Masculine	*srek*	*kečč*	*inek ~ ik*
	Feminine	*srekᵉm*	*kemmi*	*inem ~ im*
3	Masculine	*sres*	*netta*	*ines ~ is*
	Feminine		*nettat*	

Table 2. The paradigms of singular independent pronouns (IP) and indirect object pronouns (IOP).

		Tagnawt (IP + IOP)	Taqbaylit IP	Taqbaylit IOP
Person	**Gender**	**Singular**		
1	Masculine	*srenᵉɣ*	*nekkʷni*	*nneɣ*
	Feminine		*nekkʷenti*	*nteɣ*
2	Masculine	*srekʷᵉm*	*kunwi*	*nnwen*
	Feminine	*srekʷᵉmt*	*kunemti*	*nnk°ent*
3	Masculine	*srensen*	*nitni*	*nnsen*
	Feminine	*srensent*	*nitenti*	*nnsent*

Table 3. The paradigms of plural independent pronouns (IP) and indirect object pronouns (IOP).

Tagnawt possessive pronouns are constructed from the Amazigh genitive marker *n*, followed by the independent pronominal form Tagnawt: first-person singular *nesreni* (/Taqbaylit *inu ~ iw*), second-person singular *nesrek* (/Taqbaylit *inek ~ ik*), etc. As in the example: *amaqum-nesreni* 'my house.' The direct and indirect object affix pronouns of Tagnawt are identical to those of the matrix.

4. Examples of sentences

1. (Tagnawt) *Sreni, ad zerrᵉteɣ ad cemleɣ leɛziz aduban*
   (Taqbaylit) *Nekk, ad ruḥeɣ ad swiɣ aman yelhan*
   (English) Me, I will go and drink good water

2. (Tagnawt) *Tumareḍ tumarin yixectin*
   (Taqbaylit) *Tettmeslayeḍ imeslayen n dir-it*
   (English) You're saying bad things

3. (Tagnawt) *Tumarin-nesrek tidubanin*
   (Taqbaylit) *Imeslayen-ik lhan*
   (English) Your words are good

4. (Tagnawt) *Fella tumarin-nesrek*
   (Taqbaylit) *Ur meslay ara*
   (English) Don't speak ~ Shut up

5. (Tagnawt) *čiqqᵉl-iyid*
   (Taqbaylit) *ᵉfk-iyid*
   (English) Give me

5. Conclusion

The confirmation of the existence of living Kabyle slangs in the 21st century invites us to conduct research on them among the different social groups known for the use of slang in the Amazigh world. In the case of the variety presented here, I find it very intriguing to note that it could contain either rare archaic roots or disappear in the matrix. Which makes the study of such slangs very useful for Kabyle lexicography exercises, particularly with a view to standardization and neological production enterprises for common Amazigh.

I find it interesting that this argot is called Tagnawt, an Amazigh word known throughout western and central North Africa to designate what is foreign and/or not understood (cf. music and communities called Gnawa, the secret amazigh female language of southern Morocco called Tagnawt).[13] Secondly, it would be interesting to carry out an ethnographic and sociolinguistic investigation into groups of Kabyle drum players in order to understand the characteristics of this group that have allowed them to preserve such a linguistic heritage until today.

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[13] Cf. Douchaïna (1998). Depending on the language, the masculine form *agnaw* is also said to refer to 'black man,' 'slave,' 'deaf person' and Gnawa communities arrived in North Africa because of the trade of slaves.

It is possible that the name of this slang, Tagnawt, allows us to trace a link and possible exchanges between Kabyle musical cultures and those of West Africa. Perhaps as a result of the deliberate or forced migration (via the slave trade) of West African musicians to this region. This question was raised by Turner (2022) in relation to Diwan music and trans-Saharan migrations/slave trade in Algeria.

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