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Abstract and Keywords

Berber languages are a close-knit language group within Afro-Asiatic. In Berber scientific and political discourse, there is a tendency to play down the differences, and often Berber is represented as one single language with only some superficial regional variation. Berber dialectology is predominantly synchronic. Instead of providing a tree-model of the different varieties, this chapter, by using different approaches, attempts to define a number of different synchronic blocks. In a block-like classification of Berber languages, seven such historically defined entities are established. In view of the continuous movement of convergence one may doubt that the reconstruction of a Proto-Berber entity is possible.

Keywords: Berber, Afro-Asiatic, dialectology, reconstruction, convergence

BERBER languages are a close-knit language group, whose internal differences remind one of those in Germanic or Romance. In Berber scientific and political discourse, there is a tendency to play down the differences, and often Berber is represented as one single language with only some superficial regional variation (e.g. Chaker 1995: 9). On the other hand, some sources outside the world of Berberology use a very liberal definition of “language” where Berber is concerned; thus the *Ethnologue* (Lewis *et al*. 2015) has no fewer than 26 different Berber languages (see Map 20.1).

Map 20.1 The geographical distribution of Berber languages

Instead of providing a tree-model of the different varieties, I shall proceed by defining a number of “blocks”, i.e. bundles of varieties that exhibit a fair degree of consistency with one another.

Two such blocks are easily defined. First, Zenaga in Mauritania stands on its own. It is in many points very different from other Berber languages, e.g. by showing different developments in phonology, and several highly original morphological traits (for details, see Zenaga, chapter 41 of this volume). Zenaga has one sister language, Tetserret, which is spoken by parts of the Ayttawari Seslem, a small subgroup of the Iwellemmeden Tuareg ethnicity in Niger, thousands of kilometers from Zenaga territory. As shown conclusively by Lux (2013), this language has many innovations in common with Zenaga and should be considered a sister variety of it.

The other clearly defined group is Tuareg, which has several regional variants in Mali, Niger, and Algeria and, to a lesser extent, in Burkina Faso (due to immigration from the eighteenth century onwards) and Libya. Again, this group is defined by a large number of common innovations. Internal diversification is important, and speakers from different varieties may have difficulties in understanding each other.

Zenaga, Tetserrét, and Tuareg are the only Berber languages that fall outside the northern Berber dialect continuum that stretches from the Atlantic coast in Morocco to the Siwa oasis in Egypt. Although sometimes large Arabic-speaking territories lie between several patches of Berber speakers, adjacent (or the like) dialects are normally mutually understandable, and communication using Berber is possible. The effect of this continuum situation is that the spread of linguistic innovations is not blocked by linguistic obstacles; they can freely spread over the continuum, leading to an intricate network of isoglosses which only rarely define clear linguistic boundaries.

(p. 282) Berber dialectology is predominantly synchronic, trying to define different synchronic blocks by using different approaches (e.g. Willms 1980; Ameur 1990; Lafkioui 2009; cf. also Lafkioui, chapter 7 of this volume). While some minor breaks appear, most

of the results confirm a basically geographic cline, not so different from the situation invoked by André Basset, the foremost Berber dialectologist of the twentieth century:

> ce n'est même pas, comme on le croit trop généralement, une langue divisée en quelques dialectes.… Il en résulte que cette langue s'éparpille directement ou à peu près en une poussière de parlers, de 4 à 5 mille peut-être pour quelques cinq millions d'individus.
>
> (Basset 1952: 1)
>
> [It does not even constitute—as is too often believed—a language divided into a small number of dialects.… As a result, this language fragments, immediately or almost so, into a dust cloud of varieties, four to five thousand for a population of about five million people.]

Different results are obtained when taking a historical point of view (e.g. Kossmann 1999, 2013: 16–25; Naït-Zerrad 2001; Souag 2013: 17–26). This follows two itineraries. First, certain innovations that are believed to be quite early in the development of Berber, and which are very commonly found, can be used in order to single out varieties that did not undergo this development (i.e. have archaic features where the others shared an innovation). Secondly, when a consistent bundle of isoglosses defines a territory, one may venture the idea that these varieties once formed a unity. The many much less consistent isoglosses cutting through these territories are then interpreted as later innovations.

(p. 283) Using these methods, a number of historically defined entities can be distinguished, which will be described from west to east.

In the western part of Morocco, there is a large continuous territory which covers the Anti-Atlas, the Sous plains, the High Atlas, and most of the Middle Atlas. The medieval material contained in a number of texts (van den Boogert 1997, 2000) clearly belongs to this group. While the varieties spoken at the extremities of the continuum are very different from each other, there are no clear internal boundaries inside it—not even the abrupt relief of the High Atlas chain seems to constitute a major break. For practical reasons, a distinction is often made between two main varieties, Tashelhiyt, spoken in southwestern Morocco in the Anti-Atlas, the Sous plains, and the western High Atlas, and Tamazight (also known as Middle Atlas Berber),[1] spoken in the southeastern Moroccan oases, in the eastern High Atlas, and in the western and central Middle Atlas. While differentiating between these entities may be useful for practical purposes and reflects the amount of linguistic variation, it is misleading in suggesting a clear boundary between the two.

In northwestern Morocco, two more varieties are spoken that may belong to the same western Morocco block: Ghomara Berber and Senhadja de Sraïr.[2] It seems, however, that they have been without contact with the other western Moroccan varieties for a while, which has led to many atypical retentions and innovations; a more detailed investigation might reveal that one of them (Ghomara) or both are best considered entities on their own.

Eastern Morocco, most of Algeria, Tunisia, and parts of Libya belong to one single historical block, which has been called Zenatic since the late nineteenth century (for an early overview, cf. Destaing 1920).[3] This block is characterized by a large number of innovations in phonology and morphology (Kossmann 1999; Naït-Zerrad 2001; Souag 2013). Taking these innovations as a basis, Zenatic has clear boundaries in Morocco and in Algeria. In Morocco, this boundary separates Ghomara and Senhadja de Sraïr (non-Zenatic) from Riffian (Zenatic); in the Middle Atlas, it separates Ayt Seghrouchen (Zenatic) from its non-Zenatic western neighbors. In northern Algeria, Zenatic comprises all varieties except Kabyle. Zenatic is also the language of the major oases in the northern Sahara, Figuig, Gourara, Mzab, and Ouargla. Farther to the east, the boundaries of Zenatic become blurred. The Tunisian dialects (as far as we know about them) and Zuara (Libya) are still classical Zenatic varieties. However, the oases of Sokna, Elfoqaha, and Siwa share some features with Zenatic, but lack other features (cf. Souag 2013). Thus, while Zenatic has clear boundaries to the west and with Kabyle, it is more in a relation of continuum with eastern varieties.[4] In view of the large and—because of the expansion of Arabic—rather scattered geographical distribution, Zenatic has been split up in some accounts into many different (p. 284) "languages" (e.g. Lewis *et al*. 2015). This is rather arbitrary; in fact, there is sometimes remarkable mutual understanding over long distances. Thus, speakers of Figuig Berber (eastern Morocco) traveling to Libya were astonished that they could understand Zuaran without a problem, while they would not understand Moroccan Tashelhiyt.

Kabyle seems to stand alone. It has significant dialectal fragmentation, and especially the most eastern varieties (eastern part of "Petite Kabylie") are very different from what is found elsewhere. In a number of cases, Kabyle has undergone similar innovations to the western Moroccan block. It is difficult to decide, at this point, whether this points to an earlier extension of this block towards Algeria (separated by the incursion of Zenatic), or whether they represent parallel developments.

The situation in Libya and Egypt is the most complicated in Berber dialectology; unfortunately, we lack good documentation for some of the key Libyan dialects (especially Sokna and Elfoqaha, both of them probably extinct now). As mentioned above, the fishing port of Zuara has a classical Zenatic dialect. The oasis dialects of Sokna and Elfoqaha seem to represent varieties close to Zenatic, but not quite part of it. Siwa (Egypt) is relatively similar to Sokna and Elfoqaha, but has undergone major innovations, especially in verbal morphology. These innovations are so profound that one suspects that it has undergone a kind of reshuffling due to the presence of a large community of non-native speakers in the oasis—something well-known from the history of the place (Souag 2013: 28–30).

Two Libyan oasis dialects stand apart: Ghadames in western and Awjila in eastern Libya. While they share a number of important archaisms, there is hardly any sign of common innovations, and they are best considered different entities. Both are very different from the other Libyan and Egyptian dialects, although Awjila has some recent innovations in common with nearby Siwa, especially in syntax.

The dialect of Djebel Nefusa in western Libya has a special position. On the one hand, it reveals a number of very archaic features, which place it outside Zenatic and its eastern continuation, e.g. the retention of a continuant pronunciation of *β before a consonant (Kossmann 1999: 114). Moreover, it has a number of developments shared with Ghadames (esp. forms such as Nefusa *ufəs*, Ghadames *ofəs* 'hand' instead of general Berber *(a)fus*). On the other hand, some of the defining Zenatic developments are also found in Nefusan, thus establishing a link with this block. One notes that Nefusan texts are quite easy to process with a knowledge of a Zenatic Berber variety, while this is much more difficult with, for instance, Ghadames texts. Maybe Nefusan is best viewed as a basically non-Zenatic dialect which, at a certain moment, underwent a very strong influence from neighboring Zenatic varieties. On the other hand, Souag (2013: 25) suggests the opposite scenario, Nefusan being a basically Zenatic dialect that underwent significant influence from neighboring Ghadames. At this point the importance of the Ibadite network should not be underestimated (Brugnatelli 2008). The Ibadites constitute an early branching of the Islamic creed; in northern Africa, they persist in the Djebel Nefusa and in the Zenatic-speaking communities of Mzab, Djerba, and Zuara. The continuous contacts between these brothers-in-creed may well have brought about a certain "zenatification" of Nefusan.

In a block-like classification of Berber languages, one has, therefore, the following historically defined entities:

1. Zenaga block (Zenaga of Mauritania, Tetserrét in Niger)
2. Tuareg block
(p. 285) **3a.** Western Moroccan block (southwestern Morocco, central Morocco, i.e. Tashelhiyt and most of Tamazight)
3b. possibly including northwest Moroccan Berber (Ghomara, Senhadja de Sraïr)
4. Zenatic block (eastern Morocco, western Algeria, Saharan oases, Tunisia, Zuara) extending towards the east with Sokna, Elfoqaha, Siwa
5. Kabyle (northern Algeria), possibly linked to the western Moroccan block
6. Ghadames (Libya), probably linked to Djebel Nefusa (Libya)
7. Awjila (Libya)

It should be noted that some of the most salient dialectal phonetic developments in Berber cut across these groups and seem to represent later innovations. This is the case with the lenition of stops (called spirantization in Berber studies), which is found all over northern Morocco, northern Algeria, and Tunisia, as well as in Zenaga, and which cuts both the western Moroccan block and the Zenatic block in two. It is also the case with the loss of the accentual system, which happened in all non-Tuareg varieties of Algeria and Morocco, and with the reduction in the system of short vowels, which is found all over the northern continuum, except for Ghadames.

Moreover, one notes the existence of some salient features with a highly erratic distribution, cutting across many of the above blocks. One example is the distribution of the pronunciation *ṭ* instead of *ḍ* (e.g. *aṭar* 'foot' vs. *aḍar*). While *ḍ* is found throughout the Berber

territory, including Zenaga and Tuareg, *ṭ* is found in a scattering of dialects in the east (Siwa, Awjila, Nefusa), in Algeria (eastern Kabylia), in the Zenatic block (Ayt Warayn in the eastern Middle Atlas), and in the western Moroccan block (Dades region and Ghomara). Similarly, the 2SG subject marking on the verb has three variants with a discontinuous distribution. Most generally attested is *t-…-əd*. However, a number of varieties have a pharyngealized consonant in the suffix (*t-…-əḍ* or *t-…-əṭ*), e.g. Siwa and Kabyle, while others have a non-pharyngealized voiceless suffix (*t-…-(ə)t*), e.g. Awjila, Ghadames, Ghomara, and Tashelhiyt. This suggests that in earlier times, before the emergence of the currently definable blocks, other entities existed and that the groups defined above include members of different earlier groups.

As a consequence, one may doubt whether the tree model is suitable for the description of the Berber language family. Its continuous history of convergence and differentiation along new lines makes any definition of branches arbitrary. Moreover, mutual intelligibility and mutual influence render notions such as “split” or “branching” rather difficult to apply except, maybe, in the case of Zenaga and Tuareg.

Still, a number of elaborate attempts at subclassification have been made, using lexicostatistical methods.[5] In Figure 20.1, I present the results of one of these, Blažek’s (2010) tree based on twenty-two varieties using Starostin’s “calibrated” glottochronological method. These results are not too different from the seven-block compartmentalization presented above; the main difference is the place of Djebel Nefusa. Still, even if one accepts the basic (p. 286) tenets of the method, its application to Berber is difficult. The method discards loanwords from the set of items to be measured. This is relatively easy in the case of loanwords from Arabic. However, when it comes to borrowing between Berber varieties, it is hardly possible to distinguish loans from common heritage, both practically (how to see the difference) and theoretically (whether a spreading lexical innovation is to be considered common heritage or borrowing).

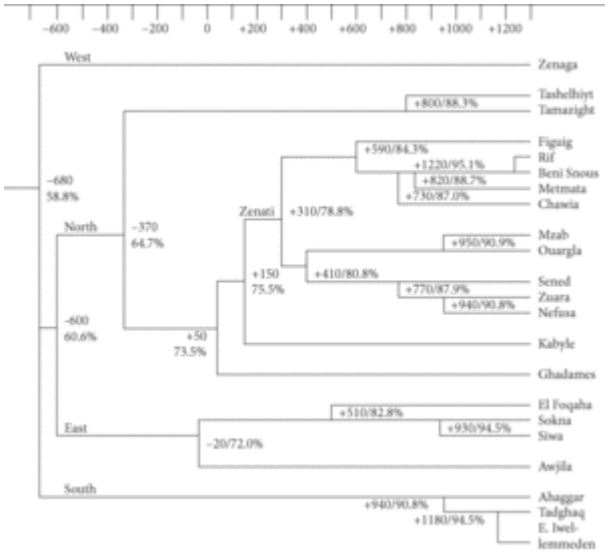

Figure 20.1 Blažek's (2010) classification of Berber founded on Starostin's calibrated glottochronology based on minimal values (language names adapted)

The dating of Proto-Berber is a difficult affair. As mentioned above, linguistic differentiation seems to be similar to that in Germanic or Romance, which would put it somewhere in the first millennium BCE (cf. Louali and Philippson 2004). A similar date (680 BCE) is provided by Blažek. Other researchers have provided much earlier dates. Blench (2001: 184), for example, has proposed a date for Proto-Berber around 4500 BCE, explaining the high degree of uniformity by "highly mobile populations already speaking closely related languages, constantly encountering one another in open terrain". Whatever the merits of the model as such may be, it is hardly applicable to northern Africa, which is for a large part mountain area.

(p. 287) In view of the continuous movement of convergence, one may ask whether the establishment of a Proto-Berber entity is possible at all (cf. Galand 2010: 14). Múrcia Sànchez (2011, vol. II: 350) has suggested that at a certain period Berber would have constituted a multinuclear koine rather than a unity, i.e., large-scale convergence would have blurred the distinctions between originally much more different varieties without obliterating them entirely. Maybe a relatively late date could be proposed for this koine. One of the remarkable facts about Berber in antique sources (Múrcia Sànchez 2011) is the general use of *gu*/*gw* where one would expect (non-geminated) *w*, and *c* rather than *ɣ*, as found in almost all modern Berber varieties.[6] Does this mean that in Antiquity (or later?) these phonemes were still pronounced as stops and that their lenition was able to spread all over the Berber-speaking territory? Were these changes accompanied by other innovations, less visible in the sources? To what extent do our reconstructions in fact represent this late Antique koineization rather than Proto-Berber? If this is the case, it is doubtful that one could even get a glimpse of the proto-language through the veil of the grand convergence movement(s) which followed it.

Two entities fall outside the normal definition of Berber in its synchronic sense, but clearly have some relationship with it. First, sometime in the first millennium BCE writings appear in northern Africa which use an alphabetic script called “Libyan”, which seems to have been developed independently to a large degree. Kerr (2010) points to important structural parallels with the Punic script and posits its invention in the second century BCE. Most specialists prefer an earlier dating (e.g. Pichler 2007), and it is conceivable that Kerr’s arguments concern an orthographic reform rather than the earliest design of the script. Although there are thousands of inscriptions in this script, their language is not easy to determine, as they consist almost exclusively of personal names. The few inscriptions that have somewhat more text show a language which has clear parallels with Berber; however, it is difficult to define this relationship with any precision (cf. Galand 2010: 15–19).

The other entity is the ancient language of the Canary Islands,[7] commonly known as Guanche. This language died out sometime in the seventeenth century, and we only have limited resources on it, which more often than not are difficult to interpret (cf. Wölfel 1965). There can be no doubt that the language contains Berber elements; there are many words that have clear and unproblematic cognates in Berber, such as *ilfe* ‘pig’ (cf. the generally attested northern Berber form *iləf* ‘pig’). On the other hand, one is struck by the presence of a large stock of vocabulary that does not have any resemblance to Berber whatsoever. Moreover, as remarked by Galand more than once (e.g. 2010: 2–4), the few short texts resist any interpretation from a Berber point of view, and no Berber inflectional elements seem to appear in them. As to the lexicon, one notes that most of the Berber material concerns agricultural terms pertaining to crops, livestock, and related concepts. Most (but not all) terms referring to basic concepts do not have a clear correlate in Berber. One could explain this by positing a double layering in the language: it would be basically non-Berber, but due to the assimilation of a later influx of Berber speakers, who may have introduced new agricultural practices and livestock, large numbers of Berber words entered the lexicon. **(p. 288)** Such an explanation is tempting but must remain speculation because of the scarcity of documentation; thus, we are much better informed about the cultural lexicon than about the lexicon relating to body parts or basic verbs.

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Notes:

([1]) Tamazight is the name of the Berber language in a large number of Berber varieties (among others Riffian and, with altered phonology, Tuareg); therefore, its use for one specific variety is unfortunate. The more neutral term "Middle Atlas Berber", which is often used instead, is unfortunate too, as it also comprises parts of the High Atlas mountains. "Central Moroccan Berber" seems to be the least problematic term, but has not been used yet by many authors.

([2]) In spite of claims to the contrary, both varieties are thriving (Lafkioui 2007; Mourigh 2016).

([3]) The name derives from the important historical *Zanāta* tribe. Whether there is a link between the historical and the linguistic entity is an open question. Note that our delimitation is different from that found in, for instance, the *Ethnologue* (Lewis *et al*. 2015).

([4]) This suggests that the propagation of the Zenatic dialects—whether by demic or merely by linguistic expansion—went from east to west.

([5]) An unconvincing classification has been provided by Aikhenvald and Militarev (1991), cited and criticized by Blažek (2010). At many points this classification seems to be arbitrary. Moreover, at points it classifies dialects which are fully undocumented (e.g. Tmessa in Libya) or which are not Berber at all (e.g. Tadaksahak, which is Northern Songhay, and the Kufra oases, which are Teda-speaking). Unfortunately, some of the main lines of this classification have been taken over by the *Ethnologue* (Lewis *et al*. 2015).

([6]) Zenaga has glottal stop as the cognate of ɣ elsewhere; in Ghadames, the phoneme has irregularly split into two: ɣ and ʕ. Finally, there are some unexpected cognates with ɣ all over Berber which have ʐ in Tuareg.

([7]) I should like to thank Marijn van Putten for his help in this matter.

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