

Indigenous Languages and Sustainable Language Maintenance: The Case of Tamazight in Morocco

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Language and culture are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, language is considered the most vital component in maintaining an ethnic group's identity; on the other hand, languages provide access to speech communities' invisible past and ancestral homeland. In the case of Tamazight in Morocco, this language variety has become a major focus within the Moroccan linguistic landscape. The latter has witnessed a significant series of innovative societal and institutional measures that actively contribute to the process of language sustainability. This paper examines the interrelatedness of language policy and language sustainability, taking Tamazight in Morocco as a case study. It also seeks to shed light on the comprehensive strategies employed by the country to ensure the revitalization and maintenance of indigenous varieties, particularly Tamazight. This investigation is based on concrete data represented in a collection of Amazigh oral narratives gathered by the author. The project involves documenting and transliterating these narratives into five foreign languages to make this oral heritage accessible to international audiences and transmissible across generations. The case of Tamazight demonstrates that language sustainability requires a holistic approach combining linguistic and political measures. From a political perspective, this includes legal recognition, expansion of language-use domains, and educational integration. At the linguistic level, maximizing public visibility requires systematic documentation of oral traditions accompanied by written transcription. Together, these initiatives can support the legitimization and standardization of indigenous languages and facilitate their integration into public, educational, and official domains. Such a situation is expected to create a healthy and enduring relationship between the Amazigh population and their mother-tongue.

Key Words: language sustainability, Tamazight, oral tradition, indigenous languages, language maintenance



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INTRODUCTION

[168] Several linguists (Calvet 2004; 2011; Thieberger 2016; Coulmas 2017; Pereltsvaig 2020) agree that the number of living languages ranges between 6,800 and 7,168. However, roughly 40% of these languages are currently endangered, as they are spoken by fewer than one thousand speakers. In the context of increasing assimilation, economic shifts, globalization, the growing dominance of English as a global lingua franca, language policies favoring dominant languages, and changing patterns of intergenerational transmission, linguistic diversity is under significant pressure. Consequently, the maintenance and protection of languages, especially indigenous languages, has emerged as one of the most urgent global challenges (Crystal 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas 2002; UNESCO 2003b). The potential loss of indigenous languages entails far more than the disappearance of a communication system; it represents an irreversible erosion of intangible cultural heritage, including unique worldviews, oral traditions, collective memory, and knowledge systems developed over millennia. In response, scholars have progressively moved beyond the notion of 'language maintenance,' understood as static documentation, toward a more dynamic and holistic concept of language sustainability.

From this perspective, language sustainability is not limited to documenting languages at risk of extinction; it is also concerned with promoting their continued use through a range of vital social, cultural, institutional, and political conditions. Languages sustainability aims to encourage the evolution of languages, their use across different domains of life, and especially their transmission across generations. In other words, a sustainable language is one that remains meaningful, functional, and adaptable to social and technological change while continuing to belong to its original community.

METHODOLOGY

The current study aims to investigate the process of language sustainability and its diverse dimensions through a threefold perspective. First, it seeks to define the theoretical scope of the topic, including several foundational frameworks related to language vitality, maintenance, and sustainability. These frameworks include established approaches such as Lewis and Simons's Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS) (2010), UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003a), UNESCO's



Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework (2003b), and subsequent critical contributions emphasizing domains of language use and institutional support.

Second, the paper adopts a case study approach by applying the above-mentioned frameworks to the Amazigh language in Morocco. [169] The fact that Tamazight in Morocco has undergone a paradoxical trajectory, from institutional marginalization to constitutional recognition in 2011, provides a rich context for examining language revitalization processes and illustrating both their opportunities and limitations. To this end, the author highlights the complex gap between actual sociolinguistic vitality and political recognition through an examination of Moroccan constitutional texts and their resulting institutional actions, scholarly studies, and grassroots initiatives.

Finally, the last part of the paper is devoted to the practical component of the study, which presents a concrete initiative developed by the author as an instance of sustainable language maintenance. This initiative consists of a field-based project documenting a number of oral narratives in Tamazight. Through the collection of oral narratives shared by four women from the village of Hassi Labied, among the oldest members of the Aït Khebbach tribe,¹ and the transcription of these narratives into five foreign languages, the project aims to safeguard intangible oral heritage and collective memory, foster intercultural dialogue, and support innovative forms of intergenerational transmission.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Languages in Contact

In bilingual and multilingual contexts such as Morocco, where Tamazight and Arabic coexist alongside French, Spanish, and other minority languages (such as Hassani, the language of the Sahrawi people, Hebrew, and Judeo-Arabic), the term ‘languages in contact’ refers to the coexistence of two or more languages within the same geographical area. Such situations often involve an indigenous language, defined as a language historically spoken by communities that inhabited a given territory prior to the establishment of present-day state borders or before the arrival of a dominant linguistic group (Stuijt 1994; UNESCO 2003a; Van Dongera et al. 2017).

¹ The Aït Khebbach tribe, which belongs to the influential Berber-speaking Aït Atta confederation, constitutes one of the principal Saharan tribes (Gélard 2008).

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Human history is rich in examples of language contact resulting from migration, conquest, political and geographical change, and, increasingly, globalization. As a result, language contact within a given area may lead to situations of bilingualism (Weinreich 1953; Appel and Muysken 2005) and directly contributes to the creation and maintenance of linguistic diversity, representing a form of richness for both local heritage and humanity's cultural heritage (UNESCO 2003a). This coexistence influences linguistic interactions, cultural practices, local identities, and social and political dynamics, often in complex and sometimes conflictual ways (Weinreich 1953; Berruto 1995; Cumbe and Muchanga 2001; Calvet 2016; Adamou and Matras 2021). Language therefore functions as one of the key elements of ethnic and cultural belonging. Moreover, these languages are spoken by distinct linguistic communities and perform different social and institutional functions, often within unequal power relations. From individuals' positioning at the intersection of languages in contact emerge complex perceptions, representations, attitudes, and linguistic phenomena (Cumbe and Muchanga 2001).

For this reason, language policy becomes essential for managing, regulating, and supporting the coexistence of multiple linguistic communities, as the status, vitality, and educational opportunities available to minority languages are profoundly shaped by such policies, as will be illustrated in this chapter. Linguistic diversity refers to the multiplicity of languages spoken within a given territory and is generally measured within the framework of national borders, assigning some languages the status of minority languages and others that of majority languages according to specific national contexts (UNESCO 2003a).

Language Policy and Language Planning

Languages are political and economic projects (Hill 2025). To ensure the survival of minority languages within a particular territory, governments and national and supranational institutions adopt language policies aimed at protecting linguistic and cultural diversity. The concept of *language policy* is broad and refers to all forms of decisions taken by a state, government, or recognized and authoritative social actor (including national and supranational institutions, social partners, and interest groups) to guide and regulate the use of one or more competing languages within a given territory (Calvet 1987; Rousseau 2005; Núñez-Méndez 2013; Agresti and Feliu 2022). Frequently expressed in official



texts such as constitutions, laws, regulations, and decrees, language policy includes measures concerning the status of languages, including official recognition and their use in institutions such as public administration and education, as well as the linguistic rights of citizens and specific linguistic communities. It may also involve the development of the linguistic code through standardization, vocabulary expansion, and orthographic reform), as a language must be adapted to perform the functions assigned to it. [171]

Regulating the linguistic practices of institutions remains necessary in areas such as education systems, public administration, and the spheres of business, commerce, and industry in order to influence linguistic situations and guide language development. For this reason, language policy should operate across multiple domains and sectors of social activity, including the language of the state (used in legislation, the judicial system, public administration, education, and toponymy), the language of work, and the language of commerce and business (Corbeil 1981; Sillani 2004). The Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM – Institut Royal de la Culture Amazighe) in Morocco illustrates how institutions can function as instruments of language policy aimed at preserving and promoting a language. IRCAM plays a central role in the development and standardization of the Amazigh language in Morocco. Its primary missions include designing pedagogical programs and educational materials for schools, supporting teacher training and academic research, preserving Amazigh cultural heritage, and advising the state on language and cultural policy (Boukous et al. 2004).

Language policy, broadly understood, is implemented through language planning, which represents a process rather than a final outcome. It is not the exclusive prerogative of governments but may also be initiated by linguistic communities and various organizations. *Language planning* consists of a set of measures and actions intended to influence or reshape how a language variety is used, developed, and integrated into different domains of life, focusing on the strategies and tools needed to achieve the objectives established by language policy. In some cases, such policies seek to grant equal status and functions to all languages and varieties coexisting within the same geographical area (Fishman 1974; Calvet 1974; Corbeil 1981; Drapeau and Corbeil 1992; Spolsky 2003; Rousseau 2005).

Building on the work of earlier linguists, Rousseau (2005) highlights two dimensions of language planning. The first, *status planning*, as the

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term suggests, concerns the position of a target language(s) within a country's linguistic hierarchy. Its objectives include securing official recognition and defining the rights and responsibilities associated with each language variety across all sectors of society, including education, employment, and the media. The second, *corpus planning*, addresses the technical aspects related to the target language. It comes into play when codification, standardization, or modernization is required. These two dimensions of language planning are considered interdependent, as questions of language status and language structure are closely intertwined in everyday linguistic practice.

Expanding on these definitions, Fishman (1974) argues that the process of language planning is also deeply connected to the cultural and social contexts in which target languages exist. Language planning not only reshapes the status of languages but also redefines relationships among coexisting linguistic communities and influences their access to education, employment, and cultural activities. It also plays a significant role in the political life of a society by fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective goals, particularly in communities that have experienced conflict and/or inequality. Along similar lines, Calvet (1974) introduces the concept of *glottophagy*, which refers to the tendency of dominant language(s) to dominate and, at times, even exclude other language varieties. For this reason, the state can simultaneously function as both a protector and an oppressor of languages. Furthermore, Calvet (1987) emphasizes that every language-planning effort is also a *policy of power* and draws attention to the delicate position of linguists, whose involvement in language planning is closely linked to the future of societies and the fate of languages, which is inseparable from the fate of their speakers. Ultimately, the survival of an indigenous language within a given territory depends, first and foremost, on its acceptance (Beacco and Byram 2016).

Indigenous Language Vitality

Members of indigenous minority groups often engage in struggles for linguistic, educational, cultural, territorial, and political recognition. Moreover, where it exists, formal education in an indigenous minority language plays a decisive role in the maintenance and development of that language (López 2010). The UNESCO (2003b) identifies a number of key factors that contribute to language vitality:

- 1 the effectiveness of intergenerational transmission;



- 2 the absolute number of speakers;
- 3 the proportion of speakers within the total population;
- 4 trends in language use across different domains;
- 5 the ability of the language to adapt to new domains and media;
- 6 the availability and quality of educational and literacy resources;
- 7 governmental and institutional language attitudes and policies, including official status and usage;
- 8 community members' attitudes toward their own language; and
- 9 the quantity and quality of documentation.

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The importance of these factors lies in the fact that the absence of any one of them may create serious challenges for the survival and maintenance of a language, particularly in the case of indigenous minority languages. In the twenty-first century, digital tools and media represent innovative avenues for facilitating both the transmission and documentation of these languages. Consequently, language policies must be inclusive, educational practices should embrace innovation, and the use of technology must be strategic while remaining sensitive to bilingual contexts in order to ensure the continued vitality and flourishing of indigenous minority languages in an increasingly dynamic global environment (Wei and Schnell 2025).

According to Skutnabb-Kangas (2013), the disappearance of a language may also result from deliberate processes aimed at erasing the identity of members of an ethnic group, often targeting children. In such cases, the phenomenon may be described as linguistic genocide, one of the most profound and least visible forms of cultural violence. It occurs when a group is structurally and psychologically prevented from speaking (or even from wanting to speak) its own language. The risk of linguistic extinction therefore refers to the possibility that a language ceases to be spoken and transmitted to subsequent generations. Particularly relevant in this regard is the Language Vitality and Endangerment Index (LVE Index) proposed by UNESCO (2003a), which is used to assess whether a language is vital, stable, declining, or endangered.

For example, Lewis and Simons (2010) introduced a model for monitoring languages and evaluating their vitality and level of risk. Known as the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS scale for short),² this framework consists of 13 levels. The higher the

² The EGIDS scale was developed to provide a broader and more systematic assessment

level, the more severe the disruption of intergenerational language transmission.

[174] In fact, through the EGIDS framework, Lewis and Simons (2010) sought to provide a more comprehensive instrument for monitoring language development and decline by expanding upon Fishman's approach. These additional variables include a language's presence in education and the media, as well as its utility across different institutions and social domains. To evaluate a language using the EGIDS framework, five key dimensions must be considered:

- 1 the identity function of the language;
- 2 the official status of the language and its vehicular function;
- 3 intergenerational transmission;
- 4 the state of literacy in the language; and
- 5 patterns of language use across different age groups.

The use of this framework allows for systematic comparison among languages in widely differing contexts and enables a more accurate assessment of linguistic domains and characteristics that might otherwise be difficult to identify. As such, it serves as a valuable reference for language studies worldwide. The protection of endangered languages therefore concerns not only languages without official status but also those that, despite official recognition, remain vulnerable in relation to a dominant language. Because language and culture are two sides of the same coin, these languages preserve unique and exclusive heritage while transmitting collective identities and knowledge. Experience has shown that even when a language enjoys official and institutional recognition, its vitality cannot be guaranteed unless it is actively used in everyday social life and integrated into the educational system (Drapeau and Corbeil 1992; Bernjak 2008; Lewis and Simons 2010; López 2010).

of linguistic vitality at the global level and represents an extension of Fishman's (1991) GIDS scale (Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale), which emphasized the crucial role of intergenerational transmission in language maintenance. Fishman argued that if children do not learn a language from their parents, there is little likelihood that they will transmit it to future generations. However, although intergenerational transmission takes place within the family, it is strongly influenced by the broader social and institutional environment. It is therefore a parental decision, but one that is shaped by political choices, societal attitudes, and structural conditions that influence language practices within the family.



*Contemporary Challenges to Indigenous Languages
and Sustainability*

The body of research produced by Fishman (1999), Crystal (2000), UNESCO (2003b), and Lewis and Simons (2010) identifies a number of challenges facing indigenous languages. These challenges represent threats that may lead to language decline or even extinction. For example, a language may lose vitality because of limited use across social domains and insufficient institutional support, particularly in an era characterized by globalization and mass media. An indigenous language may also be at risk due to low social prestige and status, which can weaken intergenerational transmission. These circumstances become even more critical when an indigenous (minority) language coexists with a dominant and socially powerful language spoken by the majority of the population. In such contexts, greater efforts are required from different stakeholders to promote the existence of indigenous languages and ensure their transmission across generations. Only through such efforts can linguistic diversity be preserved and the survival of endangered languages secured. [175]

These challenges give rise to a central question: What measures and mechanisms can ensure the revitalization, sustainable maintenance, and transmission of indigenous languages?

In indigenous linguistic and cultural contexts, sustainability must be understood as a multidimensional concept rather than a purely quantitative measure based on the number of speakers. First and foremost, it encompasses intergenerational transmission, whereby the language is actively learned and used by younger generations in everyday domains such as the home, school, and public life, rather than being confined to the memories of elders. Closely related to this is the requirement for active and functional language use. The language must remain relevant and usable in contemporary contexts, including education, digital media, and the arts, rather than being restricted to ceremonial or archival functions. Another key component of sustainability is community agency and self-determination. Indigenous communities must retain control over how their language and culture are preserved, taught, and expressed, minimizing external imposition and ensuring that revitalization efforts reflect locally defined priorities. Sustainability also implies cultural resilience, understood as the capacity of a community to adapt, revitalize, and transform its linguistic and cultural practices while maintaining core elements of its identity. This may

[176] involve reinterpreting narratives, traditions, and rituals in response to contemporary realities. Finally, sustainability in indigenous contexts is inherently holistic: language cannot be separated from culture, land, worldview, values, social practices, and community relationships (Fishman 1974; UNESCO 2003a; Skutnabb-Kangas 2013). As a result, language revitalization is often inseparable from broader processes of cultural renewal, territorial rights, and ecological sustainability.

MOROCCAN LINGUISTIC LANDSCAPE

Historical and Sociolinguistic Context

Due to its geopolitical location, Morocco has historically been the target of numerous conquests and occupations. Over the centuries, the region was inhabited or ruled by a variety of peoples and civilizations, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Vandals, Spaniards, Portuguese, and French. This 'rich' historical succession and prolonged contact among diverse speech communities have shaped the Moroccan linguistic landscape, resulting in a broad spectrum of language varieties ranging from Tamazight (itself comprising several varieties) to Arabic (which also presents a diglossic situation) and French, the language of the most recent colonial power (Khira 2022).

According to Coulmas (2013), Morocco is a country in which a significant portion of the population lives in a situation of trilingualism. Within Moroccan society, these linguistic codes occupy different positions and fulfill different functions depending on demographic strength, historical and socioeconomic dynamics, and existing power relations.

Tamazight possesses deep historical legitimacy within Morocco. However, for much of the post-independence period, it was marginalized from public life and denied official recognition, creating a classic situation in which a language with high vitality in terms of speaker numbers faced significant institutional constraints and status-related challenges. Its recent path toward official recognition provides important insights into the complex process of language revitalization. For centuries, various Amazigh dialects (such as Tarifit in the north, Tamazight in the central regions, and Tashelhit in the south) coexisted with Arabic. Classical Arabic served as the language of religion and administration. Later, Moroccan Arabic (also known as Dialectal Arabic or Darija), described by Boukous (1995) as the vernacular lingua



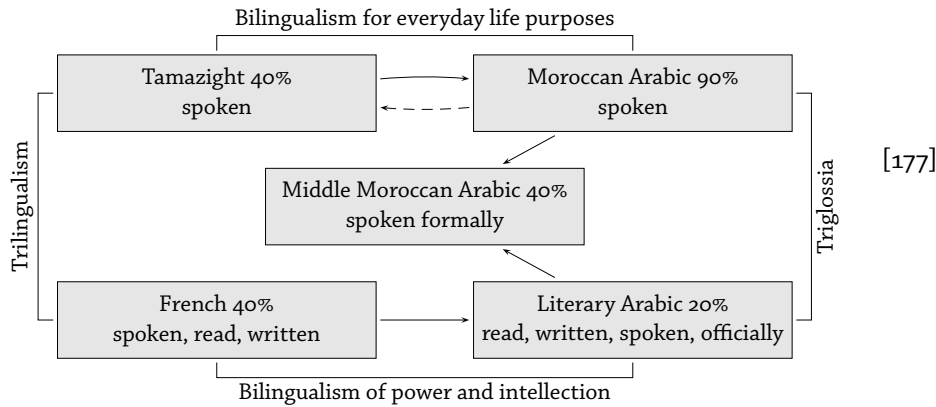


FIGURE 1 Relationship among the languages and dialects of Morocco (adapted from Coulmas 2013 after Youssi 1995)

franca of the Moroccan population and the mother tongue of non-Amazigh-speaking Moroccans, became widely used in everyday communication. During the French and Spanish protectorates (1912–1956), French emerged as the language of elite administration and education, adding another layer to Morocco’s linguistic hierarchy.

From Constitutional Recognition of Tamazight to Its Implementation

According to the Moroccan Constitution (*Constitution du Royaume du Maroc*, Royaume du Maroc 2011), Arabic is the official language of Morocco, and the state is responsible for protecting, developing, and promoting its use. This provision establishes Arabic as the principal language of government institutions, legislation, and education throughout the country. The Arabic referred to in the Constitution is Modern Standard Arabic rather than Moroccan Arabic.

Article 5 of the 2011 Constitution represented a historic turning point for Tamazight by granting it official-language status alongside Arabic. Tamazight is defined as a shared heritage of all Moroccans, without exception. However, the law that is intended to define not only the process for implementing Tamazight’s official status, but also the modalities for its integration into education and other priority sectors of public life, thereby enabling it to fulfil the long-term role of an official language envisioned in the same constitutional article, has yet to be enacted.

Moroccan Arabic, by contrast, has never been granted a clearly de-

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financed status in official texts. In the 2011 Constitution, it is referenced as one of the languages and cultural expressions practiced within Moroccan territory. Similarly, the status and legitimacy of French have never been explicitly defined in official documents, largely because of its colonial legacy. This discrepancy between reality and official recognition may be viewed as evidence of a broader sociolinguistic tension involving Francophile technocrats, Arabophone political elites with francophobic and traditionalist tendencies, and advocates of Amazigh language and culture (Benzakour 2010). In addition, several other minority heritage languages are spoken in Morocco and are recognized in the 2011 Constitution as components of the country's cultural and linguistic heritage. These include Hassani, the language of the Sahrawi people, as well as Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic.

Following independence, Morocco adopted a policy of Arabization that sought gradually to replace the language of the former colonial power with Literary Arabic across all sectors of society. As a result, Literary Arabic became the primary language of instruction and continues to be used throughout the educational system. Both the Constitution and educational policies establish Arabic as the principal language of instruction because of its status as the country's official language.

Because Literary Arabic was the only language officially recognized and legitimized by the state for many decades, the exclusion of Amazigh from public institutions, administration, education, and the judicial system contributed, in some contexts, to the weakening of intergenerational transmission. This marginalization³ gave rise to the Amazigh Cultural Movement during the second half of the 20th century. Led by Amazigh intellectuals, artists, and activists, this grassroots movement advocated for the recognition of Amazigh language and culture as integral components of Moroccan national identity. As part of this effort, the movement deliberately replaced the term 'Berber,' which was often perceived as pejorative, with the self-designation 'Amazigh.' Its prin-

³ In her paper, Ait Mous (2011) argues that the history of the Amazigh people has been marked by pain and characterized by marginalization, contempt, and cultural genocide. According to her analysis, a long-standing policy of marginalization sought to weaken, erase, or assimilate Amazigh language, culture, and identity through the exclusion of Amazigh from official institutions, its prolonged absence from formal education, restrictions on the registration of Amazigh personal names, cultural and symbolic invisibility, and an assimilationist ideology embedded within the broader policy of Arabization.



cial demands included the introduction of Tamazight into schools, greater use of the language in the media, and official recognition (Boukous 1999; Aït Mous 2011).

The following section highlights several major events that have been particularly significant to the Amazigh movement. First and foremost, 1967 saw the establishment of the ‘Association Marocaine pour la Recherche et les Échanges Culturels – AMREC,’ or ‘the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange.’ The association’s primary objectives were to document oral traditions and promote Berber popular culture and identity, marking an important early institutional initiative at a time when references to Berber identity remained largely taboo. In the following decades, numerous Amazigh associations were established across Morocco, increasing the visibility and influence of the movement. Notable examples include the First Agadir Summer University in the 1980s and the Agadir Charter of 1991. The latter, formally known as the Charter on Amazigh Language and Culture in Morocco (*Charte relative à la langue et à la culture amazighes au Maroc*), called for the recognition of Tamazight in the Constitution and its integration into various sectors of society, particularly education and the media.

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This momentum continued throughout the 1990s. A particularly significant moment occurred in 1994, when several Amazigh activists were arrested, drawing national and international attention to the Amazigh cause. Prompt government action was taken to address this critical situation, including the launch of television broadcasting in Tamazight. In 1994, King Hassan II declared for the first time that the Amazigh language should be preserved and taught, at least at the primary-school level. Five years later, as a part of a broader educational reform, the Ministry of National Education developed the National Charter for Education and Training (*Charte nationale d’éducation et de formation*, Royaume du Maroc 1999), which allowed the integration of different Berber varieties into the teaching and learning of Arabic in primary schools in order to facilitate pupils’ comprehension (Aït Mous 2011).

This activism, combined with a broader political opening in Morocco, led to gradual but significant changes. A key milestone was King Mohammed VI’s Royal Speech of Ajdir in 2001, which recognized Tamazight as a fundamental component of Moroccan cultural heritage and paved the way for the establishment of the IRCAM in 2003. The institute was entrusted with the crucial task of corpus planning, includ-

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ing language standardization, the selection of a writing system (the ancient Tifinagh script was chosen and adapted), and the development of pedagogical materials (Ait Mous 2011). The culmination of these efforts came with the adoption of the 2011 Moroccan Constitution in the context of the Arab Spring. This act of status planning provided the legal and political foundation for a new era in Moroccan language policy and fundamentally transformed the debate surrounding language sustainability in Morocco.

At this stage, however, constitutional recognition was not the end of the struggle but rather the beginning of a new challenge: language sustainability. The central task now is to implement Amazigh's official status in practice and move it upward on the EGIDS scale (Lewis and Simons 2010), transforming it from a language used primarily in informal settings into one that is fully integrated across all sectors of society. Achieving this goal requires sustained efforts in acquisition planning and the expansion of language use into key domains, particularly education, the media, public administration, and the broader public sphere.

Education and Media as Cornerstones of Tamazight Sustainability

Education constitutes the cornerstone of acquisition planning and remains the most critical domain for the long-term sustainability of Amazigh. The introduction of Tamazight into public schools began on a limited scale after 2003. During the 2003–2004 academic year, the language was introduced experimentally as a subject in public primary schools, with an initial sample of 317 schools participating in the program). An organic law adopted in 2019 established a roadmap for the gradual generalization of Tamazight instruction across all levels of education. Today, Tamazight officially forms part of the curriculum of the Ministry of National Education and is taught for three hours per week. It should be noted, however, that for some minority communities, the language of schooling differs significantly from the language first acquired at home (Cazabon 1997). For children from Berber villages, the transition from the family environment in which Tamazight is the primary language to a school environment in which all subjects are taught in Modern Standard Arabic has long been – and continues to be – a challenging experience. Compared with Arabic-speaking Moroccan students, children from Amazigh communities must often make additional efforts to adapt to and master a new language of instruc-



tion. In 2007–2008, three Amazigh-language academic programs were also established at the undergraduate level. The inclusion of Amazigh as a field of study within Moroccan universities aims to create the conditions necessary for the revitalization of the language, with a view to opening it up to the modern world (Aït Mous 2011; El Mountassir 2017). [181]

Despite these advances, the process continues to face major obstacles, including a shortage of qualified Amazigh-language teachers, limited and unevenly adapted pedagogical materials, and unresolved pedagogical and political questions concerning curriculum integration. This results in slow progress and a still limited presence of Amazigh in most Moroccan children's educational experience, making acquisition planning one of the most critical challenges for Amazigh language sustainability (Aït Mous 2011; Boukous 2013).

As it is the case with all languages, the media constitute a vital instrument for enhancing a language's visibility, functionality, and legitimacy. Strengthening a language's presence in mass media and other public domains generally has a positive effect on its prestige and instrumental value (Aït Mous 2011; Royaume du Maroc 2011; Boukous 2013). In this regard, the Amazigh language in Morocco has experienced significant progress. Today, numerous radio and television programs are broadcast in Tamazight. In 2010, a television channel dedicated exclusively to Tamazight was launched and introduced to public. At the same time, the Tifinagh script has become increasingly visible on public buildings and road signs. Nevertheless, many observers argue that the quantity of content available in Tamazight remains substantially lower than that available in Arabic and French. Moreover, despite notable progress in education and the media, Tamazight has yet to achieve significant functional integration within administrative, economic, and judicial sectors.

The Role of IRCAM in Language Sustainability

From the perspective of sociolinguistic sustainability, the achievements of the IRCAM have been highly significant for Tamazight. Its initiatives have enabled Tamazight to move beyond oral communication and the private sphere, gaining an increasing presence in institutions, education, media, and digital technologies. IRCAM has established itself as the central institution in the process of revitalization and long-term sustainability of Tamazight in Morocco, translating

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constitutional recognition into concrete institutional action. One of IRCAM's most important contributions has been the standardization of Tamazight, an essential prerequisite for its long-term sustainability. The institute's extensive body of publications (including dictionaries, pedagogical manuals, grammatical descriptions, and specialized glossaries) constitutes an indispensable resource for intergenerational transmission and linguistic continuity. These materials also provide a solid scientific foundation for researchers and educators, supporting both the revitalization and modernization of Tamazight.

As noted previously, the integration of Tamazight into the national education system represents a major structural advancement. IRCAM's collaboration with the Ministry of National Education seeks to establish the scientific, pedagogical, and material conditions necessary for this integration. These efforts include teacher training, curriculum development, and the production of appropriate educational resources. Such interventions promote a sense of linguistic ownership among Amazigh speakers themselves, a key factor in overcoming the legacy of marginalization and ensuring sustainable intergenerational transmission.

Another particularly important contemporary dimension of IRCAM's work is its strategic use of digital technologies. Initiatives such as the development of distance-learning platforms, interactive online dictionaries, and conferences dedicated to information technologies applied to Amazigh language expand the language's presence in new domains of use. These efforts contribute directly to linguistic sustainability, as the ability to function in emerging technological and digital environments is recognized by UNESCO's (2003b) Language Vitality and Endangerment Framework as a key indicator of language vitality.

Finally, IRCAM also serves as a cultural institution deeply embedded within civil society. Through the organization of festivals, academic events, national awards for Amazigh cultural expression, international conferences, and the publication of specialized journals, the institute contributes to increasing the visibility of Tamazight in the public sphere. These activities help reverse the historical stigma associated with the language and promote a positive image among younger generations, a factor that is essential for its social legitimacy and long-term sustainability (see <https://www.ircam.ma/fr>). Figure 2 provides an overview of IRCAM's key contributions to the long-term sustainability of the Tamazight language.



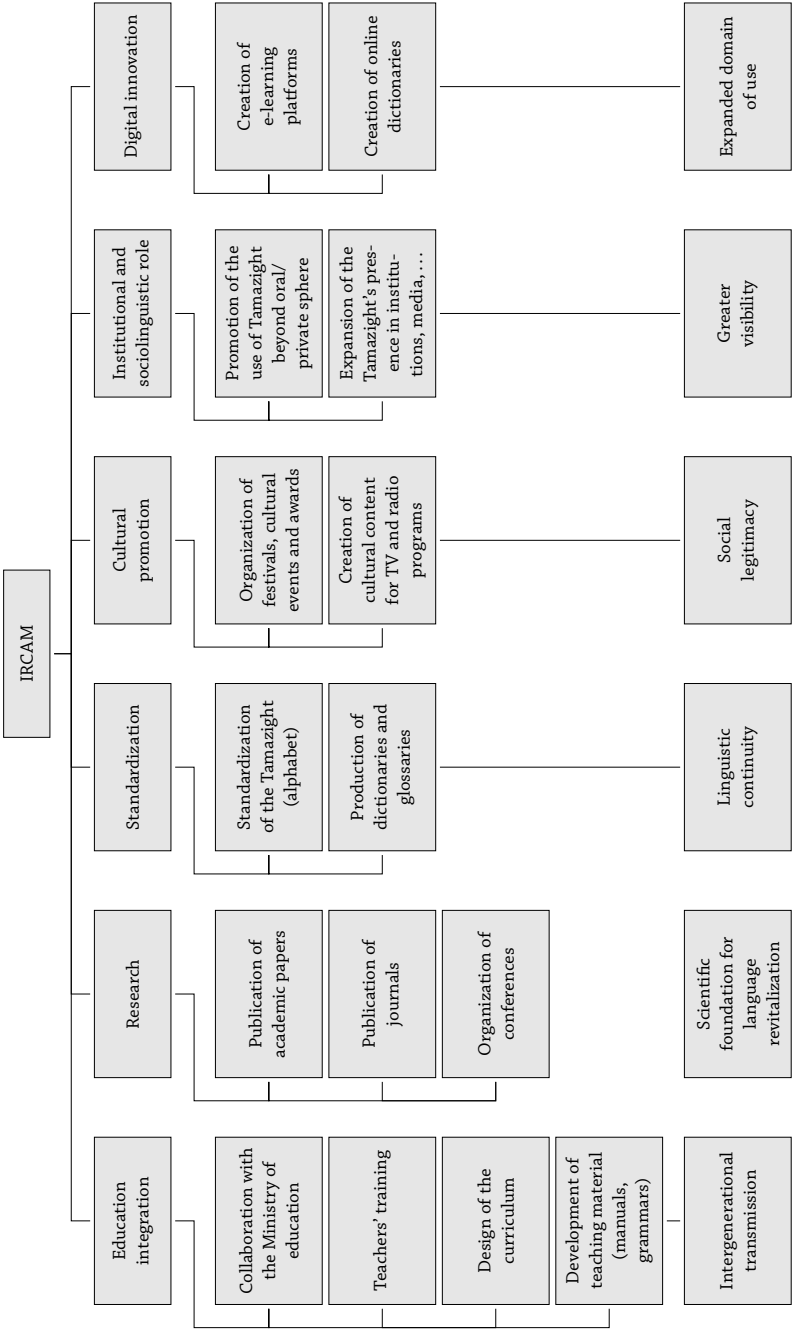


FIGURE 2 IRCAM's Contribution to Long-term Sustainability of the Tamazight Language

THE AMAZIGH FABLES PROJECT

[184] The present study is based on a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design that combines a case study approach, language documentation, and linguistic anthropology. The evolution of the Tamazight language in Morocco is examined as a single case study (Yin 2007), allowing for an in-depth analysis of the relationship between language policy, sociolinguistic practices, and community-based revitalization efforts.

Fieldwork was conducted in 2013 in Hassi Labied, a village located at the foot of the Erg Chebbi dunes in the Moroccan desert, and followed an ethnographic approach (Hymes 1974; Duranti 1997). The research involved collecting oral narratives from four Amazigh women from the local community, recognizing their central role in the transmission of linguistic and cultural heritage (Finnegan 2003; Portelli 2009; Dölek et al. 2025). The women were between 70 and 80⁴ years old and spoke primarily Tamazight, with some knowledge of Classical and Moroccan Arabic. As mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, they served as custodians of a narrative heritage transmitted orally from generation to generation.

The author met these women during a five-year stay in the village, which allowed her to establish relationships of mutual trust. As a result of this relationship, the women agreed to recount a series of fables in Tamazight. The narratives were collected during four sessions lasting several hours each and were conducted in the women's homes, providing a familiar and authentic setting. Three of the participants narrated two stories each, while one narrated a single fable.

A young Amazigh man from the village was also present during the sessions and played a key role in facilitating communication by assisting with translation from French to Tamazight and vice versa.

The narratives were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent and subsequently translated literally from Tamazight into French. They were then transcribed into direct speech in French, Italian, English, Spanish, and Slovenian as part of a broader process of language documentation and valorization (Thieberger 2016).

The researcher deliberately adopted a multilingual transcription strategy to enable the narratives go beyond their inner circles and reach wider international audiences. In doing so, the project seeks to

⁴ Although the women were asked to provide their exact ages, they preferred not to do so. Consequently, the author of the book relied on approximate age estimates.



promote language sustainability and intergenerational transmission. Rather than viewing documentation as an end in itself, the project was conceived as a sustainability-oriented initiative designed to reinforce both the symbolic and functional value of Amazigh linguistic and cultural heritage through increased visibility, circulation, and cultural recognition. Furthermore, the collected narratives are regarded as a form of collective memory, as they encode shared social values, moral frameworks, and symbolic representations that have been transmitted orally across generations and continue to contribute to the construction and preservation of Amazigh cultural identity. [185]

As a matter of fact, many young members of the Amazigh community possess only limited knowledge of their cultural heritage, while older generations have, intentionally or unintentionally, ceased transmitting the knowledge they hold. Recognizing this critical situation, the author insisted on compiling the oral narratives into a book, as the written medium is better suited to preserving both linguistic and cultural elements over time. Consequently, in 2015, after two years of research and fundraising efforts, the book *Fables Amazigh* (Amazigh Fables)⁵ was published as part of the project 'Lutte contre la pauvreté et la désertification à travers la réhabilitation de la khattara et le renforcement des compétences locales' (Combating Poverty and Desertification through the Rehabilitation of the Khettara and the Strengthening of Local Skills). The project was funded by the Italian NGO Bambini nel Deserto Onlus, the Emilia-Romagna Region, the company CADF – L'Acquedotto del Delta, and several local sponsors from Slovenia.

The Amazigh oral tradition in the Taouz region is deeply rooted in history. Although its precise origins cannot be determined with certainty, it is reasonable to assume that it developed during the period when nomadic lifestyles structured social organization in the region. This tradition continued well into the twentieth century and remained vibrant until the gradual sedentarization of tribes, which began in the 1950s. It subsequently declined significantly during the late 1990s. This decline coincided with the arrival of electricity and the expansion of

⁵ French was chosen as the language of the book's cover and as the first language of publication because the author believed that, from a language-sustainability perspective, the work could be promoted more effectively in French, particularly given that French is an integral part of Morocco's linguistic landscape (figure 1). Furthermore, the IRCAM website is also available only in a foreign language, namely French.

modern media, including television and the internet, which profoundly transformed patterns of social interaction and cultural transmission. As a result, traditional storytelling practices gradually lost their central role in everyday life.

[186] In traditional Amazigh societies, elderly men and women served as the primary custodians and transmitters of oral literary heritage, although storytelling and poetic expression were, to varying degrees, shared cultural practices within the broader community. Oral expression was not restricted to a specialized group but rather constituted an integral component of collective cultural competence. In this sense, orality functioned as a fundamental mechanism of social cohesion and cultural continuity (Chaker 2004).

Drawing on the work of Calame-Griaule et al. (1984), oral discourse can be understood as emerging directly from social experience. Proverbs, songs, rituals, stories, riddles, prayers, and incantations reflect everyday realities while simultaneously shaping collective values and social norms. Oral tradition therefore plays a crucial role in maintaining group cohesion, fostering social awareness, and ensuring social regulation. It may be viewed as a form of preventive social therapy that helps communities manage tensions and negotiate the challenges inherent in collective life.

Within Amazigh oral tradition, three main types of narratives can be distinguished: *fables*, *fairy tales*, and *riddles*. Amazigh fables, known as *lkissat n lhoucht*, feature animals drawn from Amazigh and nomadic cultural environments and are explicitly didactic in nature, conveying moral lessons. These stories often include named animal characters from Amazigh tradition (such as Aïcha the gazelle, Ali the wolf, and Touda the hare) who embody symbolic traits (intelligence is associated with the hedgehog, stupidity with the donkey, greed with the wolf, and fearfulness with the hare). Fairy tales, referred to simply as *lkissat*, involve supernatural beings and frightening figures from Amazigh cultural imagination, including Aïcha Kandicha, Boho, Tarir, and Ifis. Riddles, known as *timbzra*, rely on descriptive clues that challenge listeners to identify objects or animals rooted in Amazigh and nomadic life. Like fables and fairy tales, riddles are deeply embedded in everyday cultural experience.

These narratives were traditionally transmitted in domestic settings, most often by women, and brought together all members of the household after sunset. Beyond their entertainment value, whether



amusing or frightening, their function was both social and pedagogical. Storytelling occupied family members while the evening meal, typically couscous, was being prepared, a process that required considerable time. In contexts characterized by physical exhaustion and early nightfall, oral narration helped sustain attention, encourage patience, and reinforce communal bonds. [187]

CONCLUSION

This project resulted in a collection of seven Amazigh fables, one for each day of the week. Published in full colour, the book is organized into the following illustrated chapters:

- 1 Why is the Wolf's Coat Multicolored?
- 2 The Hedgehog's Tricks Cannot Enter the Lion's Head
- 3 It Is Better to Let Others Speak
- 4 Appearances are Deceiving
- 5 Who Is the Real King?
- 6 Why Is the Dromedary a Man's Friend?
- 7 The Hedgehog Who Traded His Thorns for a Horse

Although not exhaustive, this collection of fables constitutes a meaningful contribution to the preservation and promotion of Amazigh oral narrative traditions. Beyond documentation, the project sought to reconnect readers and listeners with the Amazigh cultural imagination by inviting them into a symbolic and creative world shaped by collective memory.

As a multilingual publication available in French, Italian, English, Spanish, and Slovenian language, the work was designed to reach a broad audience. Its objective was not only to introduce Amazigh fables to children and adults from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds but also to encourage renewed engagement with oral traditions that have been weakened not only within Amazigh societies but also in many Western contexts. From the perspective of language sustainability, initiatives of this kind contribute to expanding the domains in which Tamazight is used, reinforcing its symbolic value, and supporting the recognition and transmission of cultural knowledge across generations.

From a language-sustainability perspective, the future development of this project lies in strengthening its institutional foundations and

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expanding its modes of transmission. A future phase will involve seeking targeted funding and establishing collaboration with the IRCAM in order to produce a version of the work in Tamazight itself, not only in written form but also through audiovisual media. The creation of an animated series aimed at children would increase the appeal of Tamazight among younger generations and allow these narratives to circulate within contemporary communicative spaces. Such an Amazigh-language version could serve not only as a pedagogical resource within Moroccan schools but also as a teaching tool in international academic contexts where Tamazight is taught, such as INALCO in France and University of Naples 'L'Orientale' in Italy. By combining literacy, orality, and visual storytelling, this initiative would help strengthen intergenerational transmission, expand domains of language use, and align Amazigh oral heritage with contemporary educational and cultural practices – key conditions for the long-term sustainability of the language.

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