

Inscribing Multilingualism

Lifemaps and “Trans-scripting” Among Moroccan Amazigh Youth

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Abstract. In this paper, I examine script and writing practices after Tamazight officialization and standardization in the broader linguistic landscape of Morocco. Drawing on over 150 lifemaps (García-Sánchez 2014), whereby students in Tamazight classes in public elementary schools (grades 1 through 6) draw the places they frequent and label them, I consider script contact (contact between scripts) and the emergent ways students in southeast Morocco are expressing themselves multimodally with their entire semiotic repertoire. Similar to translanguaging (Otheguy et al. 2015) that recognizes peoples’ full linguistic repertoire without reifying named (colonial) languages, the lifemaps demonstrate the ways in which young students are, what I’m calling, *trans-scripting* or *transgraphing*. For example, elementary school students utilize several scripts (Neo-Tifinagh, Latin, and Arabic), write Arabic words with Tifinagh script, write Tamazight words with Arabic script, and muddle script directionality. I aim to take the aesthetics of scripts and children’s drawings seriously as an instantiation of linguistic justice (Baker-Bell 2020) that recognizes multiple ways of being “correct” as students are being interpellated as multiscrptal and multilingual citizens in the Moroccan social imaginary. Visually, I analyze the different aesthetics of frequented communal places. Indubitably, lifemaps are a powerful act of self-representation that reveals the ways in which young minds interpret spaces and places. Crucially, I contend that these lifemaps, with their distinctive aesthetics, function as an “other-archive” (El Guabli 2023) that documents a history enmeshed in loss and silence against the backdrop of layers of colonialism.

In January 2023, I held hands with a seven-year-old girl in southeast Morocco, whom I will call Amira. We were about to enter the weekly *souq* (market), and we saw her French teacher nearby, and we waved. I said to her, “*is trẓrit aslmad nnm?*” (Did you see your teacher?). I said “teacher” using the Tamazight word. She said, “No! That is not *aslmad*,” emphatically. “That’s *monsieur* or *ustad*.” For her, *aslmad* (the Tamazight word for “teacher”) was reserved only for the Tamazight teacher, not just any teacher. A few weeks later, I was observing Amira and her mom, Fatima, work through some homework, which her mom was very invested in.

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Amira had drawn a rainbow and some other landscape features, and she needed to come up with a title. I suggested, “How about you name it *tislit n unẓar*?” referring to “rainbow” in Tamazight (lit. bride of the rain). Her mom quickly interjected, “No, this is for Arabic; it has to be in Arabic.” I told her daughter, “Okay, so write *tislit n unẓar* in Arabic letters.” Her mom said, “No.” They settled on *nuḥaaḥḥidh ‘ala al-bi’a* in Modern Standard Arabic, “let’s preserve the environment.” These two moments exemplify some of the ways in which children are socialized into conceptualizing language boundaries and script boundaries, both reinforced by school and at home, through their parents. Arabic script is for Arabic, Latin is for French, and Tifinagh script is for Tamazight. In other words, there is a conflation between language and referential content, as we see with *aslmad* and *monsieur*, and there is a conflation between script and language where Arabic script is meant only for Arabic words rather than a medium to write any language. My paper today looks specifically at writing, script, and the visual practices of children in southeast Morocco, and the different ways kids are reproducing this script essentialism and also subverting it.

In 2001, through a royal decree, King Mohamed VI created the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (also called IRCAM) to promote Amazigh languages and begin to codify and standardize them. In 2002, some schools first began teaching Tamazight, after decades of marginalization and erasure. After generations of activism and resistance, the Amazigh Culture Movement achieved a milestone in 2011 when Tamazight became an official language alongside Arabic in the wake of the “Arab Spring.” Notably, the King, in coordination with IRCAM, selected Tifinagh, not Latin nor Arabic, as the official script for Tamazight, which is an ancient script that they modernized and revived. This government choice scripted distinction and distinctiveness because Latin indexed French, and Arabic indexed Arabism/Islamism. This schema results in an essentialized and conflated relationship between script and language.

For example, on a prominent bank’s ATM screen (Figure 1) asking, “choose your language,” Tifinagh, **the script**, is listed as the language rather than Tamazight, the actual name of the language. School then becomes a key site through which students are taught to separate these codes and scripts while also being interpellated as multilingual and multiscrptal citizens.

In Figure 2, we see the days of the week in the three separate codes (Arabic, Tamazight, and French) with their respective essentialized script (Arabic, Tifinagh, and Latin). I found this hanging in one of the classrooms at another nearby school that teaches Tamazight. While Tamazight and Arabic are the official languages, French continues to be taught in schools and for grades 3-6, students are taught six hours of French plus math and science (also taught in French) compared to the three hours allotted for Tamazight. Currently, Tamazight is only be-

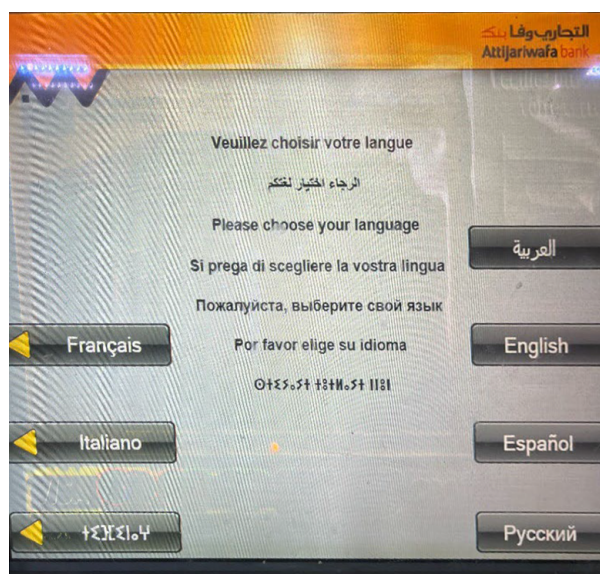


FIG. 1. Bank Screen for Attijariwafa Bank

ing taught in some elementary schools, with middle schools to soon roll out. Teacher shortage continues to be a crucial problem in universalizing Tamazight education across the country. As a scholar of language and script politics, Tamazight classes in elementary school classrooms in the southeast became a prominent setting for my research.

In designing my dissertation fieldwork, I was inspired by linguistic anthropologist Inma Garcia-Sanchez's use of lifemaps with Moroccan immigrant children in Spain (2014). While her method combined drawings and text as acts of self-representation, my approach differs by integrating lifemaps more systematically with children in Al-Jadida elementary school, rather than just focal children (see Figure 3).

In collaboration and consultation with the Tamazight teacher Achraf, we decided to include the lifemap activity as a structured classroom activity that all children in the school would participate in. For grades 1 through 4, the lifemaps were done during the *nasbat tarfihi* (the fun activity) as part of the Tamazight class. For grades 5 and 6, participants in the Tamazight club also drew lifemaps. When Achraf introduced the activity to the students, their faces lit up. They were so excited to see that they would have the opportunity to draw, and on actual drawing paper, as part of class. Parents and teachers alike were surprised that I spent money to buy the "special drawing paper" but appreciated it by saying, "bravo 'alik!" I told them that it was not my personal money but money acquired through research funding for these exact kinds of expenses. Ad-



FIG. 2. Days of the week in Arabic, Tamazight, and French

ditionally, the students were central to my research, and so I was thrilled to give them a “fun” activity, which I also knew would be fruitful in displaying heterogeneous writing and drawing practices. News travelled fast throughout the school, and classes already knew what was coming when it was their “turn” to do the lifemaps. Achraf would often take a student as an example to demonstrate to the students what we were looking for: “First, you wake up, and then where do you go?” “School!” “Great, and then after school, where do you go?” “Draw the places that you go to many times during the week, and then write down the names of the places. You can write the names however you want, or however you say them.” Often, he would draw a house on the board with an arrow to the next place to give them an idea of the task. We would remind students many times, “Don’t forget to write the names of the places! In any language!” Some students, when going over the directions, were more pre-occupied with it being “accurate,” especially in levels 3 and up. “How do I say classroom in Tamazight?” A couple of students said, “Can I write in the American language?” Achraf thought this was funny because they didn’t call it English. Achraf said, “You can write in Chinese,” signalling that literally any code was permissible, even though they didn’t know these codes. Some students sought my approval: “Is this beautiful?” Some wanted to make it a competition for who could have the best



FIG. 3. An example of a lifemap

lifemap, given that students were accustomed to different competitions at school. I assured them that all maps are beautiful and that whatever they turned in would be great.

In this talk, I aim to take children's drawings and their writing practices "seriously" as both a powerful act of self-representation and as what Amazigh studies scholar, Brahim El Guabli, calls an "other-archive." Other-archives are:

texts, artifacts, alphabets [...] where stories of the excluded, the silenced, and the forgotten live in a ghostly state [...] other-archives are part of unfolding memory and history, existing to bridge the gap between a past that is not yet finished and a society still impacted by the consequences of the unfinished past". (El Guabli 2023: 1)

I argue that children's lifemaps should be treated as an "other-archive" in the afterlives of language policy change, not merely because it documents a history enmeshed in silence in loss through the reclamation of Tifinagh but also because the act of writing in Tamazight, in any script, and depictions of lifeworlds at the margins of Moroccan society constitute an act of resistance. As a new generation that is able to write in

three different languages and three different scripts emerges, these children are hailed by the state as multilingual and multiscriptal citizens, while also subverting hegemonic institutionalized practices that privilege Arabic (and French). Lifemaps are also central to my ethnographic study of script politics because they engender the three rights or principles that shape Amazigh identification. These are: *akal* (land), *afgan* (person), and *awal* (speech/language). The Amazigh Cultural Movement invented or reinvented these principles as integral to Amazighness. Thus, these lifemaps uniquely depict the nexus of land, people, and language as children draw the places they frequent and label them.

While some scholars and instructors would consider these semiotic practices as “wrong,” “incorrect,” or “truncated” (Blommaert 2010), I aim to valorize them as acts of resistance and self-expression against the backdrop of layers of colonialism and linguistic oppression. Similar to how scholars in linguistics have theorized translanguaging as a framework that rejects (colonial) named languages that often correspond to nation-states (Otheguy 2015 et al.), I understand these linguistic and script practices to be “trans-scripting.” Thus, while the state, through schools, is trying to socialize students into a script or graphic regime where Arabic=Arabic, Latin=French, and Tifinagh=Tamazight, these students demonstrate the de-essentialized relationship between script and language. In other words, while scripts are essentialized (rheumatized) by the state, and reified through elementary schools and the standardized curriculum, kids are subverting this by writing words in whatever script they want, as we will see in these lifemaps.

Here is an example of a lifemap (Figures 4 and 5) where we can observe script contact and language contact from a first grader. “Police” is written in French in Latin script, “*tinml*” (“school” in Tamazight) is written in Tifinagh script, and she has her name and “field” written in Arabic.

These lifemaps are a point or stoppage, at a particular time on their script socialization trajectory, through which we can understand the semiotic ideological assemblages in which students are enmeshed. We can assess how students are thinking about the relationship between script and code, different varieties (Moroccan Standard Tamazight, Standard Arabic, Moroccan Arabic, local Tamazight, and French), and their lifeworlds. Elementary school is an ideal site to do these lifemaps because it is this very space where students are acquiring three scripts and 3+ codes simultaneously.

After coding 173 of these maps thus far, here are some of the significant findings. The main kinds of places that children drew are school, home, the store, the mosque, a friend/family house, and soccer fields.

One salient feature is the caricature-like nature of many of the children’s drawings, especially when houses are drawn. Many students, in particular, drew box-shaped homes with triangular roofs, undoubtedly



FIG. 4. The frontside of a first grader's lifemap



FIG. 5. The backside of a first grader's lifemap

images of homes that they have encountered in cartoons, movies, and other media, given that no homes locally look like that.

However, some students took a more emic or locally constructed approach and aimed to represent southeastern architecture where structures are adorned with tower corners as depicted in Figure 6. This is significant for depicting what their actual local architecture looks like rather than reproducing images that are circulated in the media.

Some students' images of the mosque were particularly detailed, indexing degrees of piety or the importance of Islam to their lifeworld constructions. 64% of students drew a mosque on their lifemap.

For example, several students wrote *Allabu 'akbar* (in Arabic script), "Allah is the greatest," which is how the call to prayer begins and ends. Moreover, certain students wrote *makaan llwaḍu* (place for ablution), indexing their high degree of familiarity with space and signage in mosques.

For some, kids drew *ḥanut/taḥanut/maḥal/dukkān* (convenience stores) because running to the convenience store on behalf of mom is an integral part of many children's roles in the family.

Many children, especially boys, drew a soccer field, even those who don't play soccer. Nearly 50% of the boys drew a field compared to 15% of girls. I surmise that this is mainly for two reasons. Firstly, there is an impressive turf complex adjacent to the school for club teams; thus, the field is a salient place in their everyday geography, whether or not they utilize it. Second, soccer is an ever-growing sport in Morocco for all genders, with both the men and the women having significant World Cup and Olympic runs. Nonetheless, soccer continues to be a male-dominated sport.

Many students also drew gardens. In the center or downtown part of Tinjedad, there is a garden that has swings, a playground spinner, many benches, popcorn/chip/ice cream vendors, and so forth. Many families spend their evenings in this park area as a recreational activity, and it's also a public space where women can convene and chat. Trees were also present in many of the children's maps because Tinjedad is a pre-Saharan oasis town, and so there are many fields filled with palm trees on either side of the main road that cuts through the center of Tinjedad.

In these lifemaps, we see students who have drawn very specific places that are tied to their "asl" or origin, which is a key principle of social organization in southeast Morocco.

Depicted here are different fortified villages that connect to their family's lineage, demonstrating the spatial networks that children are embedded in.

I will now present a map from each grade level so I can discuss some of the key patterns that are featured across these maps. First, we have Hamza, who is a first grader.



FIG. 6. Examples of students who incorporated southeastern architecture in their lifemaps

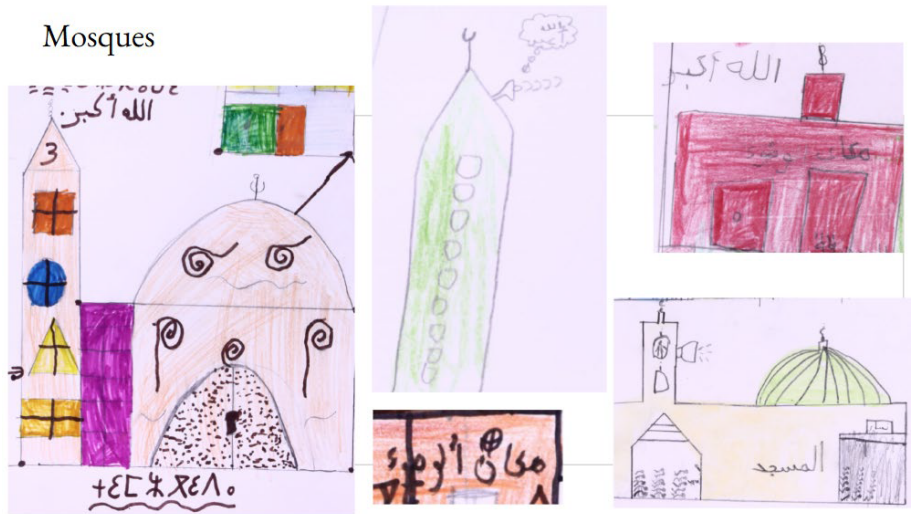


FIG. 7. Examples of mosques drawn on students' lifemaps

Fortified Villages

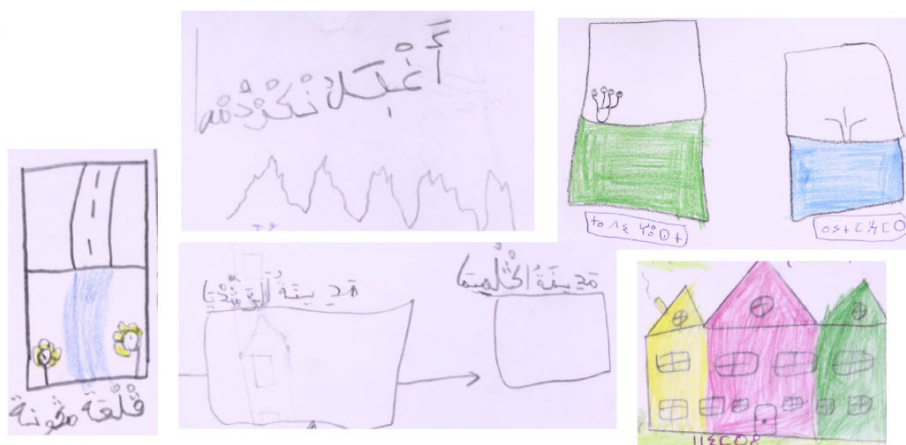


FIG. 8. Fortified villages and other cities drawn on children's lifemaps

His name is written in Tifinagh. He starts his day off at *al-manzil* (house) in Arabic but written in Tifinagh script. Then he goes to school, *tinml*, the Tamazight word for “school.” Then he goes to a garden, *turtit*, also in Tamazight, then he goes to a mosque, *timzgida* also in Tamazight, then he goes to the library, *al-maktaba* written in Arabic but with Tifinagh letters, and then he goes to *taddart n Yousef*, (Youssef’s house) written in Tamazight. Clearly, we have a lot of mixing here. Next, we have a second grader.

He has *hadiqa* (garden) in Standard Arabic, *tinml* in Tamazight (and Tifinagh script), *taddarat* meant to be *taddart* in Tamazight, and *nk ligh ghor baba* (I’m at dad’s), a sentence in Tamazight written in Arabic script.

For this third grader (Figure 11) he starts with *tadart*, the Tamazight word for “home,” then he goes to *tinml* the Tamazight word for “school,” then he goes to *mal’ab*, the Standard Arabic word for “field,” then the *masjid* or the “mosque” in Arabic, then the *jarda* (garden) which is the Darija or Moroccan Arabic term (borrowed from the French *jardin*), and then *piscine* (pool) written in Arabic letters.

For this fourth grader, we see only tifinagh script, but as you may have surmised, she does not use only tamazight words.

For “mosque,” she uses the Arabic *ljaam* and for “library,” she uses the Arabic *lmaktaba* even though all her script choices are in Tifinagh. For grade 6, we have Mariam.

“House” and “school” are both in Tamazight and written in Tifinagh, “park” and her “remediation school” are in Arabic, and the café is in

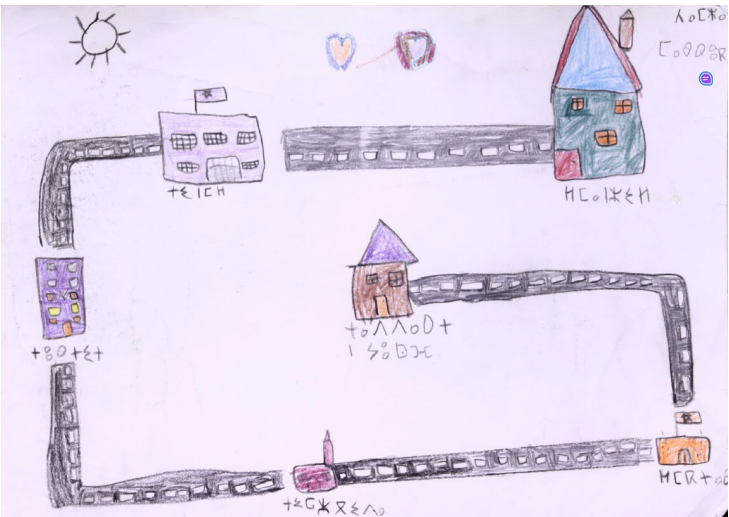


FIG. 9. A lifemap by a first-grade boy



FIG. 10. A lifemap from a second-grade boy



FIG. 13. A lifemap from a sixth-grade girl

Latin/French, which is called café Alaska, the new hot place to be in town.

This activity also allowed those who are most marginalized socially in the classroom to be able to participate in a classroom activity without judgment or fear of punishment. On Figure 14, I have compiled a few examples that illustrate this.

For example, we see a tent drawn by a second-grader who lives in the pastoral nomadic community near the school. Notably, he did not draw a caricature-looking house and instead drew the quarters in which he lives. Additionally, several students at the school have severe cognitive disabilities, and they are “integrated” with those who do not have cognitive disabilities as part of a change in education policy. While they are integrated nominally, they are often relegated to the back and occupy themselves, rarely being consciously included in the standardized curriculum. I have included several drawings here from students with cognitive disabilities across different grade levels. While the teachers often characterize their work as *walu* or “nothing,” I wanted to include their drawings because they do, in fact, matter. We see from Houda, a sixth grader (upper left photo in Figure 14), that she writes her name in Ara-

bic, and also writes various letters in Tifinagh. While this does not mean anything referentially, we see that she is still engaging in a powerful act of “trans-scripting” freely and drawing on her entire semiotic repertoire.

When I’ve observed script mixing, there are three main kinds that emerge. The first is muddying script directionality.

In Figure 15, there are examples where the Arabic text is going left to right instead of right to left, and the Tamazight is going right to left instead of left to right. While this happens more at the younger levels, there were students in the upper levels who also showed this practice.

The second type of mixing is Arabic words in Tifinagh script.

Arabic Words in Tifinagh Script

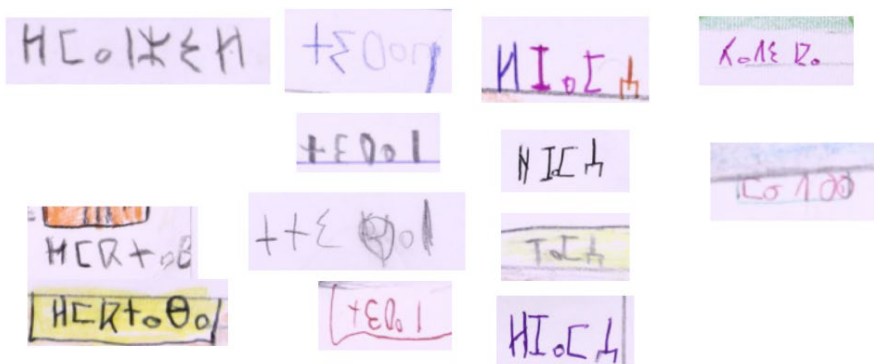


FIG. 16. Examples of children writing Arabic words in Tifinagh script

The primary examples that occurred are the ones shown here *lmanzil* (house), *tirran*, a Moroccan Darija word coming from the French *terrain*, *ljam*, the Arabic word for “mosque,” *hadiqa* the Arabic word for “garden,” and *madrassa*, the Arabic word for “school.” When Achraf asked Hamza why he wrote *lmanzil*, an Arabic word in Tifinagh, Hamza said, “I wanted to.”

The third type of mixing is Tamazight words in Arabic script.

The overwhelming Tamazight term written in Arabic script was *taddart*, meaning “house.” Other examples included here are *amdakkl* (friend), *tahanut* (store) and *tarbat* (girl). When Achraf asked Abdullah why he didn’t write *taddart* using Tifinagh letters, he said *ur tn sinngb* “I don’t know them.” Noticeably absent is French. Only one student labeled

Tamazight Words in Arabic Script



FIG. 17. Examples of children writing Tamazight words in Arabic script

a place in French, school, and he did so alongside madrasa and tinml, the Arabic and Tamazight words for school, as seen in Figure 18.

All 3 Codes (all 3 scripts)

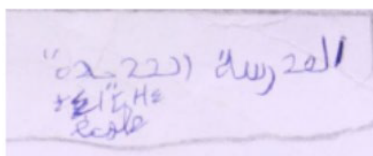


FIG. 18. "School" written in three codes and three scripts

Students are educated formally in French, but when given the option to write "freely," French was not a code that agentively chose.

As I have demonstrated, lifemaps are not clear-cut, and neither are people's lives. As a powerful act of self-representation and resistance against the backdrop of layered colonialisms, we must take lifemaps seriously as a form of social action. With more than 64% of student lifemaps being characterized as showing significant mixing, we must de-essentialize our understanding of codes, scripts, and languages. As the late linguist Jon Henner said, **"Don't let anyone tell you your language is wrong. Your languaging is the story of your life."** While scripts can

script distinction or distinctiveness, we cannot use them as a means to police, censure, or constrain people when we have a system that produces multiscrptal citizens. Just as translanguaging is a radical act in pursuit of linguistic justice (Baker-Bell 2020) that doesn't adhere to named language boundaries, trans-scripting or transgraphing as an anti-essentialist framework must also be included in our efforts toward language as liberation.

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