

Hate Speech in Online Environments: A Special Case of Users Generated Comments about Tamazight on Facebook

Dr. Amina Ouafa Benzitouni*

Faculty of Letters and Foreign Languages, Department of English, University of Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria

Email: amnwben@gmail.com

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Abstract:

The adoption of new language policies in Algeria boosted the linguistic pride of many Tamazight speakers and generated opposing views and negative reactions from some other speakers in daily social encounters and digital communities. This research examines responses to posts on Tamazight and its varieties in a corpus of Facebook comments and illustrates the explicit and implicit perceptions held by Algerian speakers, who vary on sociocultural grounds, about Tamazight. The analysis of the commentary practices revealed that users employ three main strategies to index their negative attitudes towards Tamazight and distance from its speakers: *eye dialectal performances*, *implicit* and *explicit hate speech*. Analyzing users-generated content adds to the growing body of research on sociolinguistic variation in social media (Cutler, 2020)¹ by focusing on internet users' experiences with heritage languages and shows the role of social media in the diffusion of linguistic ideologies.

Keywords:

hate speech, Tamazight, Facebook, social media, generated comments.

Introduction :

The sociolinguistic makeup of Algeria, as it has always been the case with other north African countries, has progressively changed with Tamazight gaining powerful currency as a second official language in February 2016 (Benrabah, 2013)². Tamazight has increasingly been assigned an equal status along Arabic in formal and informal settings. This resulted in the emergence of a multilingual landscape. The use of Tamazight orthography has become highly visible in street names, advertising banners and institutional buildings. Tamazight has become a popular medium of broadcasting in many national radio and TV channels, such as Beur TV and Tamazight TV4. Tamazight has also gained high visibility in social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook (Melgani, 2024)³.

The officialization of Tamazight, coupled with the ever-growing advancement of technology, strengthened the use of Tamazight in online environment. This resulted in the

* The corresponding author: Amina Ouafa Benzitouni

emergence of new stylistic choices and dissemination of new culturally embedded linguistic practices in social media such as linguistic neologism, ethnic crossing and code switching (Melgani, 2024)³. By way of example, many Algerian youngsters mix between local Arabic and Kabyle or Chawiya to express social belongingness or distance. These aforementioned sociolinguistic changes gave rise to opposing views across Algerian speakers of different sociocultural backgrounds. These opposing perspectives have been downplayed in social media platforms, wherein many net users tend to stylistically adopt sociolinguistic resources to express their negative evaluations, stances, and linguistic prejudice on Facebook posts and comments sections.

This exploratory paper seeks to examine how net users draw on digitally embedded linguistic sources, both textual and visual, to index their distance from Tamazight and mark ethnic boundaries against heritage varieties. In addition, the study explores the linguistic ideologies held by Algerian net users, who vary on several sociocultural grounds, about Tamazight, its officialization and, by extension, multilingualism in Algeria. It also seeks to understand the role of digital sharing in the diffusion of linguistic ideologies across Algerian speakers in digital communities. This study addresses the following questions:

- a. How do Algerian net users avail themselves of different visual and textual sources to express ethnic affiliations and personal stances towards Tamazight on online digital spaces?
- b. How do commenting practices on Facebook platform expose net users' explicit and deep-seated linguistic prejudice against Tamazight and its varieties?
- c. How do commentary practices contribute to the dissemination of negative sociolinguistic ideologies across Algerian net users and digital communities?

1- Research on Hate Speech in Online Environments

Hate speech is by definition a socioculturally embedded practice that causes a violation, be it verbal or psychological, of other persons or groups. Many scholars working on the relationship between language and ideology conceptualise hate speech as a linguistic behavior by which speakers or groups tend to belittle others based on their gender identity, religious orientations, race, and regional origins (Mondal, Silva & Benevenuto, 2017⁴; Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2017⁵). Relatedly, hate speech is an act of communication that manifests in different forms like provocation, incitement, or insult to other individuals or groups (Coliver, Boyle & D'Souza, 1992)⁶. Researchers like Bajari (2017)⁷ and Gelashvili (2018)⁸ reported that speakers using hateful speech avail themselves of various sociosemiotic resources that range from using words, pictures and memes to circulating hateful messages. This practice, it must be noted, is highly prevalent in interethnic contexts and between socially or ethnically unequal groups (fought, 2006)⁹.

Previous studies found that hate speech mainly targeted specific groups as refugees and immigrants in host communities, and religiously and socially underrepresented linguistic groups. However, recent works in language and ideology scholarship reframed questions that mainly addressed hate speech as a linguistic conduct reflected in all form of racial hatred, xenophobia, or other types of hateful speech fueled by aggressive nationalism and ethnocentrism, discrimination and unfriendliness towards minorities and diasporic communities (Neshkovska & Trajkova, 2017⁵; Peltonen, 2010¹⁰; Walker, 1996¹¹).

The practice of hate speech is ubiquitous in socioculturally and linguistically diverse communities which are a focal point of tension between social groups. This condition will generate clashes and stigmatisation between members (Walker, 1996)¹¹ who take notice of each other's physical traits, behaviors, and beliefs that can be referred to, explicitly or

implicitly, in socially improper practices as gossip, insults, and humiliation (Gelashvili, 2018)⁸.

Social media platforms have become progressively and continuously powerful tools that (re)construct people's ideas, perceptions, and linguistic ideologies towards other individuals and groups, creating an ideal milieu for hate speech. The circulation of hate online is increasingly becoming a challenge in modern heterogeneous societies due to immense popularity and attractiveness of social media as Facebook, YouTube and twitter among people. While these tools can offer new opportunities for language learning, digital competencies improvement and interaction (Alami, Adnan & Kotamjani, 2019)¹², they can be the source of false information, propagation and diffusion of language discrimination practices making social media a place of status war (Blattner & Fiori, 2009)¹³. For example, social media was found to be the major impetus behind the rapid diffusion of racist content through digital sharing, posting and commentary practices (Nakamura, 2014)¹⁴. Rajagopal (2002)¹⁵ argued that the anonymity option provides a safe environment for user who seek to disseminate hateful content easily behind the screen without being recognized. However, According to Rogers (2013)¹⁶ the Web can be considered as a source data on linguistic, social and cultural practices. Social media platforms can be used in research with the aim to uncover linguistic and social practices that are embedded within them and the power of social media technical specifics.

Hate speech and other linguistic social phenomena have attracted the attention of many researchers in the last few years. For instance, Laub (2019)¹⁷ reported that the use of hateful speech against minorities in social media was present in 67% of the cases observed in the USA, 50% in Latin America, 46% in Europe and 50% in other countries in Africa, middle east and Asia. In the Anatomical Theory of Hate Speech in social media, Salminen et al. (2018)¹⁸ found that most instances of hate speech in social media are overt and manifest as practices of accusations, disgrace, or swearwords use. The dominant used words against the other were adjectives as stupid, disgusting, pathetic, ugly, greedy, retarded, dirty and garbage. Warner and Hirschberg (2012)¹⁹ reported that many net users prefer to strategically modify the orthography of their content through deliberate misspellings or lexical choices in order to signal their hatred towards and distance from the other party. In the same vein, Teh, Cheng and Chee (2018)²⁰ found that disrespectful words and aggressive messages against the other prevail particularly among eight groups of people who identify with different sexual orientations, disabilities, gender, religion, race, behaviour, and class. There is a general consensus among linguists that linguistic prejudice yields undesirable outcomes on speakers of minority languages and subordinate varieties, such as perpetuation of social hierarchies and linguistic insecurity (Bourdieu, 1977²¹; Labov, 1972²²).

2- Method:

This qualitative study relies on data extracted from user-generated reactions on online digital spaces. The data used in the analysis comprise of data represented in comments written by Algerian speakers with different ages and socio-ethnic backgrounds.

2-1 Choice of the corpus:

The corpus consists of selected comments from three popular facebook pages, namely el hadth el djzairi, France 24, and Nass Batna. In stark contrast to the first former pages which are official pages, the last one is a popular local page administered by Algerian admins. It should be noted that the selection of the three facebook pages is motivated by

their popularity. Said differently, these pages are followed by many Algerian active net users who comment and react to the pages' posts on a regular basis.

As indicated in table 01 below, the selected Facebook posts for this study addressed Tamazight exclusive linguistic issues e.g., Yennayer, Tamazight officialization, Tamazight education, ... Etc. From each post, only comments and reactions which are related to Tamazight exclusive linguistic topics were selected for the data analysis; irrelevant comments addressing other issues were excluded from the corpus. The final corpus data set constitutes of 8213 comments and 15000 reactions.

<i>Post/video header</i>	<i>Author / producer</i>	<i>Views</i>	<i>Number of reactions</i>	<i>Number of comments</i>
<i>Inspectors refuse the adoption of a law that permits the instruction of Tamazight as a secondary course in educational institutions</i>	 Al Hadeth Algeria الحدث الجزائري Follow Aug 25, 2021	<i>NA</i>	<i>9.8K</i>	<i>6.8K</i>
<i>The president will sign new laws related to the officialization of Tamazight</i>	 Batna / صوت باتنة 1 Jan 2021	<i>NA</i>	<i>615</i>	<i>213</i>
<i>Celebrations of Yennayer (2972) in Algeria</i>	 FRANCE 24 Arabic / 24 فرانس Follow 11 Jan 2022	<i>NA</i>	<i>6.9K</i>	<i>1.2K</i>
<i>Grand Total</i>			<i>15K</i>	<i>8213(8K)</i>

(Table 01): (Facebook Posts and Comments from 1 January 2021 until 11 January 2022)

2-2 Data Coding and Analysis:

Comments were downloaded from Facebook pages via Website browser and coded for expressed alignment/disalignment with Tamazight identity, positive/negative evaluation, implicit/explicit linguistic prejudice content, metalinguistic and metapragmatic content, eye dialectal performances.

3- Results:

3-1 Distribution of Facebook Comments by Type:

The number of reactions per post varies widely as does the number of comments per post. However, the different types of comments break down in relatively similar ways: proportionally all of the videos generated a high percentage of comments about the Tamazight and its dialects (attitudes towards them, what features they contain, what they sound like, and what the variety connotes). As shown in the following Figure, when averaged together, 41% of comments were classified as overtly expressed linguistic prejudice, 18% of the comments contained covertly expressed linguistic prejudice, and 10% contained some kind of dialect performance.

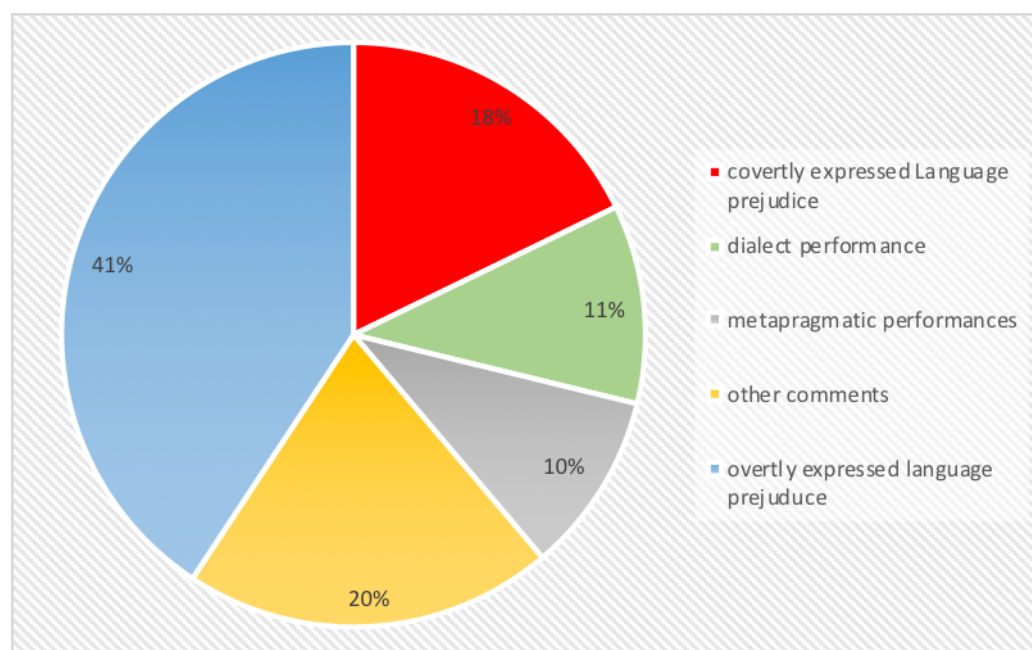


Figure : (01) Breakdown of Facebook Comments by Type (N= 8213)

3-1-1 Eye-dialectal performances:



This present bona fide example can be considered a kind of double-voicing (Bakhtin, 1929/1984)²³ in which the net user adopts the words of another person, possibly involving intertextual links to quotes from films or simply things Berbers are imagined to say. Alignment with a persona occurs through the use of rhetorical or linguistic cues to indicate alignment (uni-directional double-voicing) or disalignment (vari-directional double voicing) with the person being voiced. This extract shows that the user seems to playfully mock the persona being voiced in a vari-directional sense. His/her creative play looks like an attempt to try on the Tachawit variety, not only to code-switch into another linguistic code, but also to express contempt or distance from it.

3-1-2 Overt Language Prejudice:



(3)



(4)



(5)



Though hate speech namely linguistic prejudice is commonly believed to be a covert practice, there are cases in which it is overtly adopted, most notably in online environments as shown in the present four extracts. On closer inspection, the extracts 2, 3 and 4 associate Tamazight with caves, jungles and gypsy lifestyle. By the same token, assigning backwardness with Tamazight in Comment 4 and 5 reflects a negative evaluation of the language. Overall, these comments seem to be reflecting net users' two main points: 1) that Tamazight is stereotypically correlated with rurality and backwardness; 2) speakers tend to explicitly index their distance from Tamazight and also their evaluation of the language as subordinate and inferior. The same facebook user, also, tends to use emojis to support his negative view and mockery stance against Tamazight.

3-1-3 Covert Language Prejudice:



(7)



(8)



The following comments show how net users question the linguistic adequacy and expressive capacity of Tamazight. In extract 7, the user stated that "the world is progressing and developing while we are lagged behind", alluding to the fact the Algeria could not join the wagon of technological development. This comment is a hint to his/her perception of Tamazight language as emblematic of backwardness. He/she also capitalized on a gif picture that expresses sarcasm and laughter to provide an extra layer of meaning to the whole comment. This visual source indicates his/her distance from Tamazight language and culture. Comments 6 and 8 state that Tamazight is not qualified to be described as a language; it lacks expressiveness. Tamazight was compared to languages like English, Spanish and Chinese which are considered universal languages of science and technology as a pretext to parents' refusal of teaching the language to their children in schools. Tamazight can be used by its speakers at home only, in the user's belief. It must be noted that stereotypes, such as linguistic deprivation, lack of expressiveness and grammar rules, have been widely publicized by the so-called purist movements and prescriptivists, and still prevailing among non-linguists and academics alike. However, these myths and many others have been tackled by sociolinguists and researchers working with heritage language revitalization projects.

4- Discussion:

This study considers the ways through which hate speech practices against the Tamazight language are disseminated on Facebook platform. In this study, we analyzed data extracted from three official Facebook pages that are widely followed by a good number of Algerian net users. The selected Facebook posts for this study addressed Tamazight exclusive linguistic issues, notably Yennayer, Tamazight officialization and Tamazight education.

The results of the present study showed that Algerian net users primarily use three major linguistic strategies ranging from overt and covert discriminatory practices to eye dialectal performances in the comment space. Overall, the most frequently used words and expressions were caves, gypsy, jungle, mountains and backwardness. Similar results were reported by Salminen et al. (2018)¹⁸ who found that prejudice towards languages is mainly expressed by distasteful words (eg. retarded, ugly and disgusting)

Contrary to situations which involve face-to-face interaction, Facebook represents a "safe zone" in which many net users tend to freely and overtly express their linguistic prejudice against Tamazight and its varieties by means of diverse linguistic resources. This explains why many Algerian net users usually find themselves free to overtly stigmatise other non-dominant linguistic varieties and, by extension, heritage cultures. In so doing, net users adopt salient Tamazight linguistic forms in a playful way to signal their disalignment (vari-directional double voicing, Bakhtin, 1929/1984)²³ from Tamazight culture, which is stereotypically and historically linked with 'narrow mindedness', 'toughness', and 'backwardness'. Facebook users also avail themselves of a range of internet language sources, both linguistic and visual, to index many complex social

affiliations, stances and characteristics e.g., mocking Tamazight, distance from heritage languages and cultures, pro “monolingualism” tendency, ...etc. Cases which involve the use of covert linguistic prejudice seem to be also implemented by a few net users, instead of explicitly ascribing negative connotations to Tamazight, they tend to dismiss it as unimportant, lacking expressive capacities, backward, aberration to the norm, and not good enough to be used in educational contexts and workplace settings.

The data analysis also revealed one net user’s adoption of Berber linguistic features in his/her comment on Tamazight linguistic issues see extract 1 above. The same user follows a linguistic practice called ethnic crossing (cutler, 2002)²⁴ to describe Tamazight as characteristically dead, an indication of his negative evaluation of the heritage language. This stylized way of speaking also demonstrates that the use of mockery in his ethnic crossing is an indication of linguistic prejudice.

Conclusion:

The technological advancement, coupled with the increasing spread of social media, created new ‘*safe spaces*’ and semiotic resources for many digital citizens to index their harassment and hate speech against heritage language varieties behind the screens. Facebook represents a breeding ground for linguistic prejudice and other language-related serious issues. A bias against heritage languages is a bias against their speakers and cultures. Users tend to negatively evaluate Tamazight based varieties as a pretext to mark their distance from Tamazight local cultures. Net users adopt salient speech forms, memes, and emojis to mark complex personal stances, social affiliations vis-à-vis Tamazight, its varieties, and multilingualism in Algeria more generally. Facebook comments and posts accelerate the dissemination of negative evaluative norms and stereotypes against heritage languages across net users.

The use of hateful speech in online environments can result in undesirable and negative impacts on the socio-cognitive wellbeing of net users in Algeria. First, speakers who use Tamazight varieties in online environments can be perceived as less smart and capable, leading to the development of unwelcoming language based discriminatory practices in different economic, educational, and public sectors. In addition, the use of mockery and Language shaming can damage net users' self-confidence and hinder their online participation in Facebook and other social media platforms. Linguistic prejudice can discourage Algerian net users from expressing their views and opinions freely in social media, resulting in a homogenization of online discourse. Finally, linguistic prejudice in social media accelerates the transmission and dissemination of false linguistic ideologies and misconceptions about Tamazight and linguistic varieties in Algeria

Researchers, educators, and community leaders should work in synergy to combat linguistic prejudice and other related linguistic practices. To begin, they should raise awareness about linguistic diversity among the public and inspire users to learn, understand and respect the different languages and dialects used. In addition, sociolinguists should sweep away linguistic myths about varieties and teach the public that all languages and dialects are rule governed and equal in terms of language use and expressive ability. Moreover, implementing policies and outline guidelines that rule out linguistic prejudice and any behavior related to linguistic discrimination. Finally, researchers should collaborate with language activists to promote multilingualism in online platforms by increasing digital support for different local languages, and encouraging users to share content in their different languages and dialects.

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Footnotes:

¹ Cutler, Cecelia, Anne, 2020, Metapragmatic comments and orthographic performances of a New York accent on YouTube, *World Englishes*, 39, 36–53.

² Benrabah, Momahmed, 2013), *Language Conflict in Algeria: From Colonialism to Post-Independence*, Multilingual Matters

³ Melgani, Haroun, 2024, Clearing the Grounds: Linguistic Diversity in Algeria, In *Language Diversity in Algeria: Challenges, Current Issues and Future Prospects*, pp. 1-15, Constantine, Algeria, *AlphaDoc*

⁴ Mondal, Mainack, Leonardi, Araujo, Silva, Fabricio, Benevenuto, 2017, A measurement study of hate speech in social media. *Proceedings of the 28th ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*, 10, 85– 94.

⁵ Neshkovska, Silvana, Trajkova, Zorica, 2017, The essential of hate speech, *IJET*, 14(1), 71–80.

⁶ Coliver, Boyle, K, D'Souza, 1992, Striking balance. Hate speech, freedom of expression and non-discrimination [Article 19, International Centre Against Censorship] , University of Essex, Human Rights Centre.

⁷ Bajari, Atwar, 2017, Trends in research on communication and media in Indonesia: The micro meta- analysis on perspective, theory, and methodology, *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, 5(1), 41–62.

⁸ Gelashvili, Tiona, 2018, Hate speech on social media: Implications of private regulation and governance gaps [Master's Degree, Lund University], LUP Student Papers.

⁹ Fought, Carmen, 2006, *Language and Ethnicity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

¹⁰ Peltonen, Lari, 2010, Hate Speech against the Roma in Romania: Discourse analysis on three Romanian newspapers [Master's thesis, University of Helsinki Faculty], Helsingin Yliopiston Kirjasto.

¹¹ Walker, Samuel, 1996, *Hate speech: The history of an American controversy*, University of Nebraska Press.

¹² Alami, Abdolreza, Adnan, Kotamjani, Sedigheh, Shakib, 2019, Examining the impact of using social networks on political knowledge and political attitude by Iranian university students, *Jurnal Komunikasi: Malaysian Journal of Communication*, 35(3), 125–140.

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¹⁴ Nakamura, Lisa, 2014, “I WILL DO EVERYthing that am asked”: Scambaiting, digital show-space, and the racial violence of social media. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 13(3), 257–274.

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²⁰ Teh, Phoey, Lee, Cheng, Chi bin., She, Chee, Weng, Mun, 2018, Identifying and categorising profane words in hate speech. *ACM International Conference Proceeding Series: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Compute and Data Analysis, March*, 65–69.

²¹ Bourdieu, Pierre, 1977, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press

²² Labov, William, 1972, *Language in the Inner City*, University of Pennsylvania Press

²³ Bakhtin, Mikhail, 1929/1984, *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetic* (ed. and transl. by C. Emerson). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

²⁴ Cutler, Cecelia, Anne, 2002, Yorkville Crossing: White teens, hip hop and African American English, *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 3(4), 1999, 428-442

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