Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe how Tunisian Tamazight, an indigenous language that belongs to the Northern Berber group of the Afro-Asiatic language family, has influenced Tunisian dialect of Arabic. While many studies have examined the influence of Arabic on Berber, (Kossmann 2013; Rabah 2001, 2005, Elmedlaoui 2000) only a few have looked at the linguistic effects of Berber on Arabic. As for the effects of Berber/Tamazight on Tunisian Arabic the research is clearly lacking. In its centuries of contact with Tamazight, Tunisian Arabic has undergone several changes for which it is no longer mutually intelligible with the Arabic dialects spoken in the Middle East and the Arab peninsula, commonly referred to as the oriental dialects. The paper is written within the field of contact linguistics and relies on theories that frame a discussion of data concerning phonological, morphological, and lexical features that can be ascribed to interference from Tamazight.

The investigation is based on data obtained through various resources. At first, they were collected from Tunisian Amazigh blogs and websites and Facebook pages. Then, small lists of words were obtained at different times by three informants from the Tamazight villages of Douiret, Zrawa, and Guellela in the south of Tunisia. The collected data was narrowed down to a word list with a total number of 300 words.

The analysis show several evidence that reinforces the role of Tunisian Tamazight substrate as main origin of the current structure of Tunisian Arabic. Phonological features such as alternation in vowel quality and regressive consonant harmony; morphological categories, such as diminutives and passive form derivations, in addition to lexical borrowings, such as cultural loans and quadrilateral verbs can be attributed to contact with Tamazight. The analysis of the data also shows that some Tamazight features are imposed on Tunisian Arabic with no adaptation or integration, which represents a case of source language dominance in Van Cotsem’s terms (2000) despite the
weak status of Tamazight, being regarded as minority and endangered language (Gabsi 2011). For instance, a vast bulk of words seem to be adopted in Tunisian dialect of Arabic to replace existing words rather than to expand the vocabulary. The implications of these findings suggest discussing an independent Tunisian language not just a dialect of Arabic. The study also aims at aiding in the preservation of Tunisian Tamazight.

References