Developing one's own language: a narrative of Arabic acquisition during mobility from West Africa to Europe via Libya

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Speach, speak out, crisis

Developing one's own language: a narrative of Arabic acquisition during mobility from West Africa to Europe via Libya

Développer sa propre langue : un récit de l'acquisition de l'arabe au cours de la mobilité depuis l'Afrique de l'Ouest vers l'Europe

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Les citations en arabe sont traduites en anglais par l’autrice May Rostom.

TEXT

Introduction

1 “I learned Arabic in Libya”, a young Gambian man who had recently arrived in France told me in 2015, four years before I embarked on this research. At the time, this statement challenged my perception of the migratory movement between Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe. It was influenced by Eurocentric media narratives that portrayed Libya

solely as a horrific gateway to Europe, discarding the complexity of migratory motives and trajectories. However, many social scientists have emphasized the nonlinearity of these irregular mobilities, describing them as "stepwise migrations" (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Schapendonk 2007). Individuals often undertake long and complicated journeys guided by projects rather than predefined destinations. Their plans and strategies regularly mutate in response to the obstacles and opportunities they may encounter. Whether their primary destination is North Africa or Europe, migrants heading north often stay in Maghreb countries, sometimes for years.

2 The linguistic dimensions of these migratory movements have received limited attention in studies exploring their motivations, methods, and impacts. However, these mobilities involve multiple linguistic adaptations as each stage of the journey is characterized by distinct sociolinguistic settings. The multifaceted interactions give rise to new communicative practices, including Arabic practices, a perfect illustration of the non-linearity of migratory journey. In this paper, I argue that studying the diverse emerging practices of Arabic provides valuable insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics of transnational mobility networks. In addition, it allows to outline personal, social, and geographical trajectories as well as the lived experiences of individuals engaged in these movements.

3 This paper presents and discusses a narrative language biography that describes an elaboration of a practice of Arabic along transcontinental trajectory, first in Libya then in Europe, through encounters with Arabic speakers from different origins and heterogeneous language practices. The speakers' narrative and language uses will be examined using the analytical tool of *repertoire*, which allows to correlate language practice with individual life trajectories across geographical and social topographies (Blommaert 2008), with the linguistic resources available in particular spaces (Pennycook and Otsuji 2014), with language ideologies, and with the lived experiences of language (Busch 2015).

4 In order to situate the narrative in a larger context, the first part builds on the existing literature on migration in Libya to identify macro-geopolitical elements that have shaped and reconfigured the migration landscape in Libya and the settings in which migrants

come into contact with Arabic. I will then discuss motives for acquiring new language uses in response to power dynamics and social environments. In the second part, I share and comment on excerpts from the narrator’s linguistic biography, before analyzing the repertoires employed during the narration. The last section focuses on the speaker’s discourse on Arabic and its varieties that allows to better apprehend his lived experience of the language. Finally, I summarize the main arguments and discuss this language elaboration in relation to sociolinguistic settings as well as to the speaker’s projects, struggles, and strategies. I argue that the speaker has developed a unique language use, and that his repertoire and representations of Arabic reflect his personal trajectory in transnational settings, as well as his feelings of social affiliation and non-affiliation.

Theoretical framework

5 The narratives of trajectories and language use are approached through the framework of the sociolinguistics of mobility, which focuses on “language-in-motion” (Blommaert 2010, p. 21). This framework provides pertinent concepts to grasp the sociolinguistic complexity of a culturally globalized world in which language practices are transformed by the mobility of both speakers and linguistic resources. Rather than thinking of language in relation to stable geographical locations, this framework aims to insert language “in a spectrum of human action which is not defined purely in relation to temporal and spatial location, but in terms of temporal and spatial trajectories” (Blommaert 2010, p. 37).

6 The literature on the sociolinguistics of mobility builds on a critical poststructuralist understanding of language and linguistic boundaries that challenges a perception of languages as static, delimited, and separate entities (Silverstein 1979; Pennycook and Makoni 2007; Irvine and Gal 2000). Like other poststructuralist approaches to language (e.g., translanguaging), this framework shifts away from language as system and acknowledges the hybridity and the fluidity of linguistic practices. The literature employs thus the notion of “repertoire” as an alternative to languages as bounded entities (Busch 2012). The repertoire was first defined by Gumperz as “The

totality of linguistic resources [...] available to members of particular communities" (Gumperz 1972, p. 20-21 in Blommaert and Backus 2011). Several scholars revised the notion to propose alternatives to the "speech communities", the point of departure in the original concept, as it has been defied by "phenomena such as increased mobility, migration or participation in transnational networks of communication" (Busch 2015, p. 3). Blommaert reconceptualizes the repertoire as related to "individual life trajectory" (Blommaert 2008). Pennycook and Otsuji use the term "spatial repertoire" to consider the available language resources in a particular space (Pennycook and Otsuji 2014). Hence, the repertoire, linked to spaces and trajectories:

> dispenses with a priori assumptions about the links between origins, upbringing, proficiency, and types of language, and it refers to individuals' very variable (and often rather fragmentary) grasp of a plurality of differentially shared styles, registers, and genres, which are picked up (and maybe then partially forgotten) within biographical trajectories that develop in actual histories and topographies (Blommaert and Rampton 2011, p. 5).

7 Busch expands the concept of repertoire to include two further dimensions: the first is "language ideologies," because "personal attitudes to language are largely determined by the value ascribed to a language or language variety in a particular social space" (Busch 2015, p. 9). The second is "the lived experience of language" considering that:

> the emotionally charged experience of outstanding or repeated situations of interaction with others [...] keeps alive the process of inscribing language experience into body memory, or more specifically into the linguistic repertoire, whether a specific experience is charged with feelings of wellbeing or of discomfort (*Ibid.*, p. 11).

8 To explore these two dimensions, she proposes complementing the spatial approaches to repertoire from an observer's perspective with "a first-person perspective based on biographical narratives" (*Ibid.*, p. 6). The language biographical approach recognizes "the heterogeneity and the singularity expressed in the individual stories" (Busch 2016, p. 2). At the same time, its main interest is not in the

uniqueness of a story, but "what its apparent singularity can reveal about specific dimensions of language practices and ideologies that are neglected when taking an assumed 'average' speaker as representative for a certain group" (*Ibid.*, p. 9). This study follows Brigitta Busch's methodological approach to language narrative biographies and also takes into account the recommendations of other scholars who study narratives related to migration.

9 These scholars emphasize the need to consider the micro-context and interactional properties of the narratives in addition to the macro-sociopolitical context (Pavlenko 2007; Canut 2021; De Fina and Tseng 2017). De Fina and Tseng argue that narratives collected in interviews are representations of language practices, and that these practices can be better observed through ethnography. However, in contexts where ethnography is unfeasible (as is the case in this research), they insist on the importance of analyzing these representations in detail and with attention to "the social and linguistic context of utterance" (*Ibid.*, p. 391).

10 To my knowledge, no published study in the framework of language and mobility examines the effects of migrations and contacts on Arabic uses from a transnational perspective. This is despite the significant flows of people to and from predominantly Arabic-speaking regions, as well as the increased interactions between speakers of different varieties of Arabic in the diaspora and through digital communication channels. It is necessary to note here that the term "Arabic" does not refer to a homogeneous language, but rather to a linguistic continuum that encompasses diverse standard and non-standard, written, and oral varieties, variables, registers, and styles. One of the aims of this study is precisely to highlight (and celebrate) this heterogeneity.

Methods of data collection and presentation

11 The first part of this paper is based on data that was collected, as part of an ongoing doctoral research, in three European localities: Palermo (June – September 2019), Paris (October 2019 – February 2020), and Marseille (February 2021 – March 2022). All the

participants in this research were in Libya after 2011 and reported learning and using Arabic there. They come from different states in the West African region, but they have undertaken similar trajectories, experienced the same migratory policies, and have moved in related networks. This is not an attempt to ignore individual social and linguistic backgrounds; they will be highlighted in the analysis that adopts a biographical approach.

12 I collected narratives about migration trajectories and language practices through semi-structured qualitative interviews (18 in total, of which 10 have been transcribed and analyzed so far). The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 3 hours. They focused on individual trajectories, forms of socialization and interaction, and language practices in the localities crossed. I cover these topics with open-ended questions, but often ask more direct follow-up questions related to the speakers' perceptions of the languages they mention.

13 Besides interviews, observations and informal exchanges took place during my intermittent work as an Arabic-French-English interpreter over a period of six years, in formal and informal hosting structures for newcomers in France. Encounters with participants in Paris were facilitated by social workers at an associative reception center. In Sicily and Marseille, due to the different political and administrative functioning of the reception centers there, I relied on informal encounters and personal relationships to meet interviewees.

14 The second part of the paper is an in-depth analyze of one narrative collected in Marseille. I met Abdelhakk[1] through a common Sudanese friend. We discussed the research theme before the interview, which took place two weeks later in my apartment. The setting was therefore informal. We recorded twice in the same day. The total length of the recordings is 94 minutes.

15 The profile of the researcher influences the contact with the participants and the research results. Being a migrant from Syria myself seemed to facilitate contacts and create a sense of complicity with the participants. For example, when talking about conflict, irregular border crossings, and being a foreigner, some openly referred to the Syrian war and migration. In their narratives, many participants highlighted their encounters with Syrians along their journeys. Furthermore, I am identified as an Arabic speaker, which obviously influences

the discourse about Arabic and Arabic speakers. On the linguistic level, I used Arabic as the main medium of communication, employing mixed repertoires mainly from Levantine and standard Arabic, and to a lesser extent from North African vernaculars (which I developed in France). I took care to avoid terms that are highly restricted to a certain variety and to adapt my repertoires to the interlocutor. I also used English, French, and Italian when my interlocutors took the initiative.

Contexts of language elaboration

Geopolitical elements shaping Libya's migratory landscape

16 Libya has historically been part of a dynamic Saharan space characterized by the movement of people (Pliez 2006). Since the 1960s, however, the country has become particularly attractive to international immigrants, as oil exploitation has fueled rapid economic growth (Jacques, Romdhani and Prestianni 2012). The regime of Muammar Gaddafi (1979-2011) promoted immigration to Libya from countries in the Sahel (Bredeloup and Pliez 2011). Work immigrants were joined by political and climate refugees, as well as displaced populations from neighboring regions. Gradually, Libya became a composite migratory zone of seasonal workers, refugees, transit migrants, and immigrants mainly from African and Levantine countries.

17 The North African migratory landscape has been reshaped by the EU's exclusionary migration policies. Since the early 2000s, EU strategies to externalize its border control have been implemented through multilateral (EU-North African states) and bilateral (e.g., Italy-Libya) agreements to combat the so-called "illegal migration"[2]. As a result, access to North African countries has become increasingly difficult and living conditions for migrants have deteriorated.

18 The uprising against the Gaddafi regime in 2011 and the armed conflict forced some 800,000 migrants to flee, according to the International Organization for Migration (Libya's total population at the time was 6.2 million). More migrants soon arrived. Because of the

civil war and the chaos that followed, Libya’s borders became less controlled by the state, while the influence and power of international trafficking networks increased (Morone and Favier 2020). Border crossing became easier, but once inside Libyan territory, migrants were often victims of arrest, torture, deportation, and trafficking (Jacques, Romdhani and Prestianni 2012). Crimes are committed likewise in the traffickers’ warehouses or in the detention centers for “Combating Illegal Immigration”. It should be noted that those centers were built under Gaddafi with Italian funds, and operated later by militias that receive European financial support as part of the politics of border control externalization (*Ibid.*).

19 Despite the war and the high risks, the country maintains a strong economy and relies heavily on migrant workers in the service sector. As a result, it continues to attract migrants of different profiles and projects, whether their primary intention is to stay in Libya or to transit through it, also because of the obstacles to going elsewhere. According to the IOM, at least 625,638 migrants from 44 countries were living in Libya in 2020 (International Organization for Migration 2020), which is about 10% of the population. However, the number of migrants is often underestimated due to the irregularity of entry and stay. Migrants with different profiles and origins gather in both national and transnational groups, often in specific districts of Libyan cities.

Descriptions of sociolinguistic settings in Libya and contexts of contact with Arabic

20 The narratives collected for this study portray Libyans as monolingual Arabic speakers and Arabic as the dominant medium of interaction in Libya. The data do not mention the possibility of using other languages with individuals who hold economic, political, and social power. Participants describe an informal labor market where the ability to communicate in Arabic is a prerequisite for access. This is highlighted as the main motivation for learning the basics of this language, and they emphasize that communication in the work environment is predominantly in Arabic. Interestingly, in some interviews conducted mainly in English or French, participants showed a tend-

ency to use Arabic terms when describing their work-related activities in Libya.

21 Among the motivations for learning basic Arabic, access to work is not the only factor directly related to power structures and hierarchies in Libya. Some openly identify the ability to understand Arabic as a means of gaining protection and power in a hostile environment. Yet, it is important to consider other social aspects and dynamics. Many participants mention the acquisition of Arabic or other languages such as French, Bambara, or Wolof in Libya through interactions with other migrants, colleagues, co-residents, and friends. This phenomenon underscores the sociolinguistic diversity of transnational mobility networks highlighted in the narratives. As in the following excerpt from Abdelhakk's narrative:

> yaʿnī lībyā aslan yaʿnī zayy (.) [3] mā (1.5) zayy ḥọsh kebīr (.) issā entum fil-ṭābeq ar-rābeʿ ṣah̥? (.) fī talga yaʿnī ṭābeq el-awwal fī nās (.) ṭābeq et-tānī fī nās (.) tālet wū rābeʿ(.) yaʿnī ajnās yekhtelef yaʿn (2) fī marrāt maṣriyīn fī talga tawānsā (.) wū marrāt talgā sūdāniyīn wū tshādiyīn wū nījer (.) yaʿnī yekhtelefū kida (.) Fa ʾanā sakantā kān fī maṣriyīn wū tawānsa wū senegālyīn wū tshādīn wū sūdānyīn (.) kida yaʿnī [4]

> I mean Libya in the first place is like (.) not (1.5) like in a big house (.) you are on the fourth floor right? (.) you find some people on the first floor (.) people on the second floor (.) on the third and the fourth (.) Different kinds of people I mean (2) sometimes Egyptians (.) you find Tunisians (.) Sometimes you find Sudanese (.) Chadians (.) and Niger (.) I mean they differ like that (.) For me where I lived there were Egyptians, Tunisians, Senegalese, Chadians, and Sudanese (.) like that I mean
> Abdelhakk – Recording 2 – Min 5

22 Arabic is also a language spoken by other migrants. The term "Arabic," in the participants' narratives, is not used only to refer to local varieties in Libya. Just as Abdelhakk, many mention encounters and daily interactions with Arabic-speaking migrants from different countries, in workplaces, shared housing, and even in prisons. For instance, the descriptions of the social environment in the prisons of "Direction for Combating Illegal Migration" underline the presence of other "Arabs" (e.g. Egyptians, Moroccans and Sudanese) that undergo the same

repressive policy. They share the status of irregular migrants. Arabic speakers thus are placed on different levels of the social hierarchy in Libya.

23 The elaboration of Arabic use in North Africa is influenced by macro geopolitical factors, global and local power structures as well as migratory projects, strategies, and activities. For those who choose to stay and work in Libya, acquiring communicative basics of the language may be motivated by the need to generate income and navigate the local social dynamics and hierarchies. Other social factors come into play as Arabic can serve as a communicative medium with Arabic-speaking migrants. Thus, the relationship to the language and its varieties becomes more complex, as it can be both a language of the dominant and the dominated.

24 Furthermore, according to both narratives and to observations, the use of Arabic is not limited to predominantly Arabic-speaking locations. It can be practiced in any context where it proves to be a useful medium of communication, including European localities. Some participants report having stopped using Arabic once they left Libya, whereas others say that they still use it in Europe, either as a main medium of communication in their daily life or only on specific occasions.

25 In what follows, I share and analyze the narrative of a speaker who continued to use Arabic in his daily life in Europe, to underscore the complexity of the factors that guided his language use in Libya and beyond. I then examine the repertoires employed by the narrator and his discourse on Arabic to better understand his relationship to a language shaped by this experience.

Focus on one narrative on Arabic acquisition and use: Abdelhakk

The narrative language biography

26 Abdelhakk is an only child, raised by his mother in a village in the center of Niger[5], where, as he describes, everyone speaks only Hausa. He has been to the “koranic” [school], but he stresses that he

did not learn any language there, nor reading or writing. I asked in which language he and the other students were taught to recite the Koran:

> lā qor’āniyya nagrū bī lugha darijiyya ya‘ni mā nagrū ‘arabiyya […] tagrā min nagrā qor’ān d‘īf (.) d‘īf shadīd ya‘nī (.) mā nafham minnū (1.5) masaln ya‘nī (.) ’inta tagrā wi yifahhimak bel (.) bel hausā ya‘nī mosh yifahhimak bil bil ‘arabī (.) la’inna huwwa mosh yetkallam ‘arabī ’aktar. Fanihṇā mū mā ‘ārfīn ‘arabī

> No in the Koranic we read in colloquial (vernacular) not in Arabic […] you read from the Koran in a weak way (.) very weak I mean (.) We don’t understand it (1.5) I mean for example, you read and he [the teacher] explains to you in (.) in Hausa I mean. He doesn’t explain to you in (.) in Arabic. Because he himself doesn’t speak Arabic that much (.) So we don’t know Arabic
> Recording 1 – Min 9

27 Abdelhakk was 17 years old when he started his journey. He left his home village and headed directly to Sabha, a southern city in Libya, without a clear idea of what to expect there. He explains that after two difficult days on the streets, a Libyan man led him to a building mostly inhabited by Nigeriens. He stayed there and was able to communicate with the others using Hausa. But, as he describes in the following excerpt, he quickly realized that in order to work, he had to learn some Arabic:

> ’anā kān kunta fi sabhā fa mā nafhām ‘ārabī ya‘nī ’illā ghēr as-salām […] fa lībiyā ’intā mā ta‘rēf ‘ārabī mā gādēr tishteghel (1.0) fā anā taqrīban ‘indī ūsbū‘ēn lākīn fī bā‘ḍ īl’’aṣdiqā’ yifhāmū ‘arabī shwayyā shwayyā yishtoghulū (1.0) fa ’anā mā nafham ‘arabī gā‘ed fīl-’bēt […] fa ’anā badēta nishūfa vīdyo ‘arabīyya katīr (.) khalāṣ anā badēt nifham ‘arabī shwayyā shwayyā shwayyā shwayyā shwayyā (.) lamman shaher fa ’anā ṭala‘tā b‘ed dā

> I was in Sabha and I didn’t know a word of Arabic other than Salam (hello) […] In Libya if you don’t know Arabic you can’t work (.) I was there for around two week and some friends who understood Arabic a little bit were able to work (.) but me because I didn’t understand Arabic I was sitting at home […] So I started watching a lot of Arabic

> videos (.) That was it (.) I started to understand Arabic, little by little, little by little (.) and that during a month then I went out
> Recording 2 – min 12

28 He states having used audiovisual media to learn Arabic. But in which variety of Arabic? So, I ask him "what kind of videos?" He mentions Egyptian series and Turkish series dubbed in Arabic by Syrian actors. That would mean that he was exposed to different varieties of Arabic since the very beginning of his language acquisition.

29 Shortly after, he explains, a Libyan contractor engaged his services as a casual daily worker on construction sites. In the following excerpt, he describes acquiring new repertoires of Arabic during work:

> awwal marra kān saʿeb innā ash-shughla neshteghel (.) yīqūl entā muwēn mā tafham ʿarabī walā tafham kida kēf neshtegholū ? (.) khalāṣ ḥamdellah fī nasīb ʾinnū neshtegholu maʿāū (1.5) bʿd yomēn talāta yomēn talāta (.) neʿallem kalema kalmatēn kalema kalmatēn (.) ḥatta al-ḥamdellah ligīt mustawwa shwayya kida fīl-ʿarabīyya

> The first time it was difficult for me to do the work (.) [The contractor] was saying where are you from? You don't understand Arabic and you don't understand that (.) how can we work? (.) But thank God it was destined for me to work with him (1.5) After two three days two three days (.) I was learning a word or two a word or two (.) until I attained a certain level in Arabic thanks to God
> Recording 2 – Min 13

30 While he was mainly using Arabic in his work environment interactions, he reports that he still used Hausa in his daily life, particularly when communicating with Nigeriens and Nigerians with whom he was living. Since working on construction sites wasn't regular, he explains, he started working in a "barraka", a greengrocer's shop, for an Egyptian employer. He comments, saying that in the city of Sabha, all the greengrocery stores are held by Egyptians.

31 After two years of living in Sabha amid the second Libyan civil war, and due to the increasing intensity of armed confrontations, he moved to Tripoli, only to discover other kinds of difficulties. He started considering travelling further, especially after learning that his mother in Niger had passed away, as he explains. Nonetheless, he

had to collect money to realize this project. In Tripoli, he worked again on construction sites, but this time for a Syrian contractor. He describes plurilingual interactional dynamics in the two-room apartment that he shared with three of his co-workers: a Sudanese, a Guinean, and a Senegalese. In his words, the Senegalese and the Guinean communicated in French and in "another language they had... like a mother tongue". In the following, he describes how he communicated with Amadou, the Senegalese who was closest to him:

> yaʿnī yiheḅba nitkallam maʿāh nitwannas maʿāhū kitīr (.) yaʿnī aqrab ṣadīq an kamān (1.5) yaʿnī hūwa yitkallam faransī wu ʾānā mush nitkallam faransī (.) lāken kān jīt ṭrāblos ʾanā baʿref ʿarabī bitāʿ lībiyā shuwayya yaʿnī (.) fa hūwa yaʿref ʿarabī lībiyā basīṭ yaʿnī (.) fa khlāṣ kunnā nitwannas bisuʿūba yaʿnī (.) fīl-bidāya bisʿūba lāken al-ḥamdilla yafhamnī wa nafhamū ʿādī yaʿnī (1.5) kunnā ʿāyshīn kida

> I mean I liked to talk to him to spend a lot of time with him (.) He was my closest friend too (1.5) he speaks French and I don't speak French (.) but when I came to Tripoli I knew a little bit of Libya's Arabic (.) and he knew some basics of Libyan Arabic (.) So we used to communicate with difficulty (.) In the beginning with difficulties but gladly he understood me and I understood him normally I mean (1.5) We used to live like this
> Recording 2 – Min 3

32 Arabic in his narrative isn't used only with "native" Arabic speakers, whether from Libya or other Arabic-speaking countries, but with anyone with whom he shared repertoires of Arabic and not Hausa. In the last excerpt, when he exposed the languages that Amadou could speak, he only mentioned French, even though he had earlier stated that Amadou spoke another language "like a mother tongue" (but which he did not name). We will see later that Abdelhakk differentiates between two types of languages: "a mother tongue" and "general language", the latter referring to a language that is more widely shared.

33 Abdelhakk recounts his journey with a joyful tone and generally positive terms. Yet, his tone shifts to one of hesitancy and unease as he recalls the hardships he endured while in Libya. The deprivation of

rights opened the door to all sorts of abuses and exploitation, which he experienced firsthand:

> A: […] fa tajī nafsā l-sanā ʾalfēn w tamantashar jā wasal fayakūn as’ab min ʾalfēn w sabtaʾshar (1.5) fa kulli sanā yikūn asʿab min as-sanā al-ākẖar
> M: min ʾayy nāhịye kān aṣʿab ?
> A: wallaī min nāhịyat el-ʾamnī wa min nāhịyat āāāh (2.0) ʾannu humma el-lībiyīn aslan mā bihịbbū fi n-nās es-sūd (.) mā bihẹbbūhum kitīr yaʿnī fī lībīā (2.0) fā (.) khlāṣ yaʿnī kulla sanā intā tiwājih suʿūbāt katīr yaʿnī (1.5) Fa w/ law intā mā metfakker ʾinnū fil ʾākhra we kidā (.) innū tikūn\tā (.) tintehẹr wu taʿmel ʾayya hạ̄ja (.) yaʿnī ʾihāna katīr biʾahānūk katīr marrat fī lībīā (.) yaʿnī ʾintā teshtaghel (.) marrāt (.) mā/ kan law ishtaghltā maʿ lībī mā yaʿṭīk fulūsak(1.5) law intā tigūl ʿaṭīnī fulūsi yishil yiwaddīk lilshurṭa (1.5) wish-shurṭa yimsikak fil aaa fi es-sijin

> A: […] then when the year 2018 arrives, it turns out to be even harder than 2017 (1.5) Each year is harder than the previous
> M: In which terms harder ?
> A: In terms of security and in terms of aaah (2.0) that the Libyans they don’t like black people in the first place (.) They don’t like them much I mean in Libya (2.0) so (.) each year you face many difficulties I mean (1.5) So and/ if you don’t keep the Day of Judgement in mind and all (.) You would be/ you would suicide or do anything (.) I mean they humiliate you a lot and many times in Libya (.) I mean sometimes(.) you work (.) and not/ if you work with a Libyan he won’t give you your money (1.5) If you ask him for your money he would take you to the police (1.5) and the police will put you in prison
> Rec 2 – Min 20

34 After living for five years in Libya and surviving four long detentions in the prisons managed by the “Department for Combating Illegal Immigration”, he managed to cross to the other side of the Mediterranean. But to his surprise, he says, the boat did not land in Italy, which he had heard of before, but in Malta. There, he was immediately imprisoned for entering the country irregularly. “The place is an island”, he discovered three months later when he was released from detention. Getting out of the country was going to be complicated and expensive, and he had to work to collect the money to finance

this trip. So, as he describes, he headed to the main square to find a job as a daily worker. He was thrilled to find a Syrian contractor again.

> Fa 'anā etʿawwadta 'innū eshteghel ṣbbāgh wū ḥājāt dāk (.) Fa gābaltā sūrī fagulta al-ḥamdillah fā hāzā ahṣan ḥāja lay (.) Li'annū nafham minnā wayafham minnī aktar yaʿnī (.) khlāṣ eshtaghaltā maʿāhū

> I'm used to working as a painter and that stuff (.) So, when I met a Syrian, I said thank God, this is the best thing for me (.) Because I understand him, and he understands me more I mean (.) So I worked with him
> Rec 2 – Min 38

35 Abdelhakk states that he worked alongside a Sudanese and a Senegalese for this contractor, and that Arabic was the main language of communication in the workplace. Since the Senegalese did not speak Arabic, the Syrian contractor communicated with him in English and then translated for the other two when necessary. Although Abdelhakk began to understand English during his stay in Malta, as he says, he primarily used Arabic both at work and in his place of residence. He lived in the main detention/reception center for migrants in Hal Far, where he spent most of his time with Arabic-speakers from Sudan.

36 A few months later, he explains, he managed to get out of Malta and arrived in France. He was sent by the French administration to a reception center in the south. He says to have started learning French with local elders volunteering to teach the basics of reading, but that he practiced French the most with an Arabic-speaking Moroccan resident:

> fakhalās itʿarraftā maʿa maʿa wāhḍa (.) sūkā (.) ismahā sūkā (.) min maghreb(.) fakhlāṣ hīya bardū tabʿan taʿref titkallam ʿarabī (.) ʿarabī bitāʿā ṣaʿb shuwayya lāken nitfaham ʿādī […] hīya qāʿda fī s-sakan mā nafs es-sakan lāken mā bʿīda minninā zayy khamastaʿshar dagīg kida […] nitwannas maʿāhā ktīr (.) fa hīya taʿref faransī miṭawila shuwayya (.) fa marrāt titkallam an bil-faransī (.) fa 'ānā nitkallm lahā bil-faransī (.) wū ʿashān kida shuwayya shuwayya tʿallamtā faransī

> Then I met a woman (.) Suka (.) her name is Suka (.) from Morocco (.) she also knows how to speak Arabic of course (.) her Arabic is a little difficult but we understand each other normal [...] She was in the residence not the same residence but not far from us (.) like fifteen minutes away [...] we used to talk a lot (.) she knew French (.) she was there since a while (.) so she used to speak to me in French sometimes (.) and I replied in French (.) This is why little by little I learned French
> Rec 2 – Min 54

37 Based on this extract, we could say that Abdelhakk's acquisition of French repertoire through communication with Suka was facilitated by his practice of Arabic. His statement "Her Arabic is a little difficult, but we understand each other" reflects an openness toward unfamiliar varieties: as he does elsewhere, he emphasizes the possibility of intelligibility and communication. When discussing Suka's use of French repertoires, he justifies it by saying that "she was there since a while", although it is very possible that she used French repertoires before living in France, considering the sociolinguistic landscape in North-West Africa and the widespread plurilingual practices that include French repertoires. However, it seems that he draws on his own experience here when he makes direct links between unexpected language practices and the mobility of the speaker.

38 Abdelhakk was later transferred to a reception center in a small Provencal city. He was administratively based there when we met. He considers being in this city problematic because he has very limited opportunities for socialization. He reports that the only person he knows in the new city is a Nigerian who was transferred to the same residence at the same time, with whom he communicated in Arabic:

> huwa kān sakan fī lībiyā fatra (.) fa baʿref bitkallam lugha lībīyya shuwayya shuwayya (1.5) fa ʾanā law ṭalʿtā min ghurfa fa nitwannas maʿahū (.) law mā ligītū (.) ʾanā nogʿod fī ghurfa yaʿnī

> He had lived in Libya for a while (.) So he knows how to speak the Libyan language a little bit (1.5) If I get out of the room I chat with him (.) otherwise (.) I stay in my room
> Rec 2 – Min 49

39 For this reason, he further explains, he tries to go as often as possible to the Parisian region where he stays with friends who are Arabic-speaking Sudanese and Chadians that he met earlier on his trajectory. And he expressed his intention to move to the capital to be around them.

40 When describing his strategies to learn Arabic upon his arrival in Libya, Abdelhakk mentioned watching videos in Arabic. During the interview, he stated that he still consumes multimedia in Arabic, but now for entertainment purposes. He accesses YouTube with his phone and uses voice search to look up videos since he doesn’t have literacy practice of the language. Among his favorite musicians, he named a Sudanese singer, Nancy Ajaj, who has a “tender and sensuous voice” (*sōt rahīf wu ḥassas*); a Lebanese singer, Miryam Fares; and a Tunisian singer and rapper called Balti. He said that he also likes to watch “funny clips”, of which he mentions a prank show by a Syrian YouTuber and a Sudanese cartoon:

> fī musalsalāt kartōniyya sūdāniyya kidā yaʿnī (.) bi tamsīl mudablaj (2.0) blēl (.) wāḥẹd bigūlu blēl (.) hādā nihẹbbu katīr yaʿny

> There’s a Sudanese cartoon like that (.) with dubbing (2.0) Blail (.) it is called Blail (.) I like this one a lot
> Rec 2 – Min 48

41 Different vernaculars of Arabic are used in these videos. He is conscious of the linguistic plurality and speaks explicitly about it when I ask him in which language he watches videos:

> Bilugha ʻarabiyya(.) Bass ʼayyi lugha ʻarabiyya kān (1.5) Nasmaʻ ʼayyi lugha lʼarabiyya masalan(.) Bitāʻ tawānsā wu ssūrīyīn (.) tsa (.) shinu gasdī (.) lībiyā (.) ʼayya yaʻnī betakallam ʻarabī ʼanā nishufā

> In Arabic language (.) but I mean no matter which Arabic language (.) I listen to any Arabic language like the one of Tunisians, and Syrians (.) tsa (.) what do I want to say (.) Libya (.) No matter which one if they speak Arabic I watch
> Rec 2 – Min 48

42 To summarize, in Abdelhakk’s narrative, the acquisition of Arabic was first motivated by his need to access jobs in Libya. Yet, along the trajectory he used Arabic pragmatically, realizing his projects and building social connections even in Europe. Abdelhakk did not speak English, Maltese, nor Italian when he arrived in Malta, and did not speak French either when he arrived in France. Thus, Arabic turned out to be a useful medium of communication and socializing with other mobile or “de/reterritorialized” speakers (Jacquemet 2005) including those for whom Arabic is not a first language (the Senegalese flat mate in Tripoli, Libya, and the Nigerian co-resident in a reception center in France). Arabic practice seems to have facilitated his acquisition of French repertoires through interaction with a Moroccan woman he met in France.

43 Besides, the role of media is highlighted in Abdelhakk’s narrative. He reports watching videos and series to learn Arabic when he first arrived in Libya. At the time of the interview in 2022, he declared still consuming digital media in Arabic for entertainment purposes, mentioning audiovisual productions from Syria, Sudan, Tunisia, and Lebanon. The diversity of language resources appears to be further enhanced through exposure to mobile digital media. This diversity of resources and orientations is reflected in the repertoire that Abdelhakk employs during our interaction, as we shall now see.

The repertoires employed during the narrative interview

44 Abdelhakk distinguishes variation in Arabic use and refers to varieties with respect to countries (e.g., Algerian, Syrian, Soudanese, etc.). In this section, I examine speech form to identify some of the repertoires he employed. Only basic and easily identifiable features will be discussed, such as the verbal prefixal pronouns that distinguish western and eastern varieties, and lexical items that indicate specific varieties. These are compared to the varieties of Arabic as documented in Arabic dialectology. Meanwhile, I remain conscious of the fluidity of borders between documented languages and between the repertoires used by one speaker. The choice was made here to refer to both the largest geo-linguistic groupings traditionally identified in the linguistic literature as Eastern (Oriental) versus Western

(Maghreb) Arabic [6], and to smaller regional dialect groupings (e.g., the five groups in Versteegh and Versteegh 2001) and national groupings.

Biographical, personal and "polynormative"

45 Abdelhakk employes heterogeneous repertoires of Arabic during the interview. In the present tense, he uses mostly western Arabic pronouns like in ***ni****tkallam*–***ni****tkallam****u*** (I *speak*–*we speak*). Yet he uses the eastern Arabic prefix b- with few specific verbs as in *'anā* ***b****a'ref* (I know) and ***b****ihịbbū* (they like). Sometimes, he mixes both systems as in *kunta ana* **bini***shtaghal* (I was working) where the verb has both the western n- and the eastern b-, thus creating an unconventional and innovative speech form.

46 His speech contains lexical items that point to specific verities like ***zōl*** (man/person) that is used exclusively in Sudan, and ***kida*** (like this) used in Sudanese and Egyptian Arabic. For "house" he uses exclusively the name ***ḥọsh***, as in Libyan varieties and to a lesser degree in Iraqi varieties. He also employs equivalents from different varieties to designate the same object. For example, to say "cell phone" he uses three ***jawwāl, naqqāl*** (that seems to be widely used in Libya) and ***telefōn***. For "money" he uses ***gorūsh*** (used in Sudan and to a lesser degree in Saudi Arabia) and ***fulūs*** (very widely used in North Africa and in different parts of Asia).

47 These repertoires point to different Arabic varieties. In that sense, they can be qualified as "polynormative", to use Blommaert's term, that is: "reflecting the availability of normative-functional 'standards' in a complex superdiverse environment" (Blommaert 2018 in Schneider 2021, p. 40). The speaker has delt with different norms of Arabic with the different speakers and medias. His speech draws from a unique combination of resources related to his individual geographical and social trajectory which are being reinterpreted, rearranged, and employed with respect to his communicative objectives and strategies during interaction. This process gives an idiosyncratic and highly personal speech form and indicated a creative reorganization and appropriation of repertoires used.

Fluid, negotiated, adapted to interlocutor

48 Not surprisingly, during our conversation, Abdelhakk seems to select from his repertoires what he believes would be the most comprehensible to me, his interlocutor. This process is made explicit in the following excerpt in which he describes his work as tiler in Libya, and tries to find a 'Syrian' equivalent for a 'Libyan' lexical:

> Esh-shughul maʿrūf yaʿnī fil-bidāya fī (1.5) **gazza** (.) fī lībyā yigūlū **gazza** laken mā ʿāref bes-sūrī tigūl shinū (.) Bigūlū er-ramla (1.5) **es-sūrī er-ramla** (.) **raml taʿrafī sah̩ ?** (.) khalāṣ nijībū **er-ramla** w baʿdēn nijībū ez-**zillēs** hādā wa ismantī w khalāṣ (.) Nakhlit wa nijīb/ esh-shughl wāḍeh̩ yaʿnī

> The work is known I mean in the beginning there is the (1.5) **gazza (sand)** (.) In Libya they say gazza but I don't you how you say it in Syrian (.) They say **ramla (sand)** (1.5) in Syrian the **raml (sand) (.) you know raml right ?** (.) So we bring the **ramla** and then we bring the tiles and the cement and that's it (.) We mix and bring/ The work is clear I mean
> Rec 2 – Min 7

49 The question he addresses to me is further evidence of negotiation of meaning. In the following, he continues using the more widely used synonym that he perceives Syrian, using it both in feminine and in masculine form. It is to be noted that for "tiles", he employs the term ***zillēs***, which is used exclusively in North Africa. This illustrates a relevant distinction of repertoires and a process of speech accommodation with respect to these categories.

50 He employs the lexical ***zōl*** (person), which is, as mentioned above, usually restricted to Sudanese varieties. He used it twelve times during the interview, and on three occasions he complemented with equivalents.

> ʾayyi **zōl** mashghūl ʾayyi **insān** mashghūl

> every **man** is busy every **human** is busy
> Rec 2 – Min 36

> kān ānā law mā ʿindī mathalan anuary aw māʿindī ayy ḥāja (.) fa ānā khalās nirjaʿ bārīs li’annā ’anā itʿwwadtā bārīs ketir min [city] (.) [city] mā fī baʿref **zōl** yaʿnī mā baʿref **shakh**ṣ yaʿnī

> If I don’t have [to get] mail for example or anything (.) I go back to Paris simply because I got used to Paris more that [city] (.) In [city] I don’t know **a man** I mean I don’t know **anyone** I mean
> Rec 2 – Min 52

51 He employes ***shakh***ṣ only once, here in example (b). This is the lexical that I employ during our interaction to say person, beside *wāhẹd* (one). On the contrary ***insān***, in example (a), is a lexical he uses frequently (24 times). It is a lexical shared in different varieties but not always used as “person”.

52 Interestingly, he is conscious of the adaptations and verbalize this process in the following excerpt:

> ’anā nitʿawwad ʿala ayyi ’insān yaʿnī (.) ayyi ’insān (.) assā msalan ’insān masalan yitkallam masalan min jazāyer (.) fa ’anā bengdar niḥāwel nitkallam baʿḍ / joz’ min lugha jazā’iriyya ḥatta hūwa yifham minnī shuwayya (.) yaʿnī mā yegder yizbuṭnī belzabṭ

> I adapt to any person I mean (.) any person (.) like for example a person who speaks from Algeria for example (.) I can try to speak some/ partially Algerian language so he can understand me a little (.) I mean he won’t be able to pin me down exactly

53 This quote illustrates awareness of the diversity of repertoires of Arabic and of the repertoires the speaker employs. When he estimates that his interlocutors have different set of repertoires, he would accommodate his speech by choosing from his repertoires what he believes to be the most efficient to achieve mutual understanding. This statement also reflects a sense of mastery over his repertoire, which he can accommodate to suit his communicative goals.

Perception of Arabic and its varieties

54 Abdelhakk’s discourse on language sometimes contains labels and categories that conform to widespread beliefs about language, or

language ideologies. However, at other times, he offers much less common commentary on language. For instance, he refers to Arabic as a linguistic unity distinct from other languages, which is a common perception in Arabic-speaking regions and sub-Saharan Africa due to various historical and political factors, by both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers (Miller 2009, p. 234). However, he uses an unfamiliar label for this linguistic whole: a "general language." Abdelhakk describes his first encounter with Arabic and says that in his region in Niger, when he used to go to the well to bring water, he had heard strangers say "salām"(Hello), but he didn't know at that time what kind of language it was. Then he comments:

> fa'anā 'awwal kunta be'raf lugha 'arabī zayy **lughat 'umm** ya'nī (.) mā 'āref 'innu 'arbī hiya **lugha 'āmma** w dowal katīr bittkallam 'arabī

> Before I thought that the Arabic language is like **a mother tongue** I mean (.) I didn't know that Arabic is **a general language** and **that many countries speak Arabic**
> Rec 2- Min 28

55 He uses the term lugha 'āmma (general language) to describe Arabic, in opposition to lughat 'umm (mother tongue). I understand the opposition *general language / mother tongue* as *lingua franca / vernacular* in academic terms. This interpretation also works for the other matches of the term, for example when listing the languages spoken by his flatmates in Tripoli: "French, and another language they had (1.5) like a mother tongue". Later in the interview I ask him if he considers Hausa a general language, as it is spoken in different countries too. He says:

> lissa nās mā mā bitkallmū hāūsā ktīr ya'nī (.) illā 'insān **el-lugha bikhus huwwā** yitkallam

> People still don't speak Hausa that much I mean (.) only a person who is related to this language speaks it
> Rec 2 – Min 48

56 Abdelhakk would have had a different perception of Hausa and its diffusion if he had travelled West rather than North. Regardless, he

seems to exclude it from the category of general languages because he believes that it is only spoken as a “first” language. This would mean that he perceives Arabic as a general language as it is used by speakers from different linguistic backgrounds, and not only as a “first” language.

57 In his narrative, Abdelhakk distinguishes varieties of Arabic and refers to them geographically, using state names, conforming to common use, as “generalizing labels are commonly used to refer to dialect types spoken in the respective countries” (Palva 2006). Despite the fact that “national boundaries often do not correspond to regional dialect boundaries – the Arabic of northeastern Algeria is surely closer to that of northwestern Tunisia than it is to the dialect of Arabic spoken in southwestern Algeria, yet both are perceived and treated as Algerian Arabic” (Walters 2007).

58 He refers to regional varieties as languages – Arabic languages – and still uses the term “Arabic language” as a generic label. He evaluates the varieties according to a perceived “difficulty” (to be understood) and “familiarity”. Interestingly, the adjective “difficult” is the most often used to describe what he calls “the Arabic of Libya”:

> liʾannā lībiyā ʾanā kuntī fī bilādhom (.) famahmā **lugha saʿba** faʾanā tʿawwadta ʿalō

> Because Libya I was in their country (.) So no matter how **difficult** the **language** is I got used to it
> Rec 1 – Min 16-17

59 The pronoun “their” in “Libya, I was in their country” seems to reflect a feeling of otherness or alienation. A few minutes later in his narrative, he qualifies this “Libyan language” again as the most difficult Arabic he has ever been confronted with, which is a strong statement since Libya is the only dominantly Arabic-speaking country he has lived in. One can assume that it is the most familiar to him. When asked why, he makes an explicit link between a repertoire and the emotional experiences associated with it:

> A: tayyeb ḥatta aṣdiqāʾī el min nījer mā bafhamū/ yaʿnī anā bitkallam mā bafhamū nihāʾī (.) liʾannī ʾanā taʿallmta ʿarabī min musalsal wu

> ḥājāt kida (.) li'annā hummā bītkallamū ʿ**arabī bitāʿ lībīā** bītkallamū shwayya shwayya (1.5) laken ʿarabī tānī mā bafhamū minnū (1.5) faʿarabī bitāʿ lībiyā innū ṣaʿb yaʿnī mukhtalef min ʿarabī tāʿ sūriyā we es-sūdān w jazayer w ḥājāt yaʿnī (1.5) yekhtalef minhum ktīr (.) ʿarbī btāʿ āā (1.5) shenu ismā (.) lībiyā (1.5) fareg katīr minhom yaʿnī (2) hūwa ṣaʿb (1.5) **aṣʿab ʿarabiyya anā wājhtā** ʿarabī bitāʿ lībīā
> M: wallah (1.5) kīf / lēsh bithịss innō kān aṣʿab shī lak ?
> A: **tayyeb liʿannu** (1.5) **lībiyā huwā mufh balad tāʿ(.) ʿāmna** (.) mafīsh ʿamni (.) Famman intā tikūn fī makān mā fī ʿamnī (1.5) **faʿintā khāyif katīr** (2) fakulli marra yaʿnī intā titlaʿ fī sh-shāreʿ wāḥed yitkallam kalām mush kuwayyes (.) **khlāṣ intā tikrah el-balad we tikrah el-lugha** za/ aslan yaʿnī (.) khalāṣ mā geder fehemt **minhom** ʿaktar (.)ʿarabī bitāʿ lībiyā (.) kān asʿeb ketīr yaʿnī (.) **humma asʿbīn will-lugha al-ʿarabī bitāʿom asʿb**

> A: ok even my friends that are from Niger don't understand/ I mean when I speak they don't understand at all (.) Because I learned Arabic from series and this kind of things (.) Because they speak **the Arabic of Libya** they speak it a little (1.5) but [when it's] another Arabic they don't understand it (1.5) The Arabic of Libya is like difficult I mean different from the Arabic of Syria and Sudan and Algeria and stuff I mean (1.5) it's very different from them (.) The Arabic of aa (1.5) what is it called (.) Libya (1.5) big difference I mean (2) It is difficult (1.5) **That hardest Arabic I have ever been confronted to** is the Arabic of Libya
> M : really (.) How / Why you feel that it was the hardest for you ?
> A : **Ok because** (1.5) **Libya is not a country of** (.) **secure (.)** There is no security (.) So when you are in a place that is not secure (1.5) **you feel very afraid (2)** Each time I mean you go out to the street someone says words that are not good (.) **So you hate the country and you hate that language** itself I mean (.) So I couldn't understand much **from them** (.) the Arabic of Libya (.) It was very difficult I mean (.) **They are difficult and their Arabic of difficult**
> Rec 1 – Min 16-17

60 First, he differentiates in this passage his own Arabic from "the Libyan Arabic" and attributes this difference to a process of learning Arabic through audiovisual media. He distinguished the Arabic spoken in Libya from all forms of Arabic, listing "Sudanese", "Syrian", and "Algerian". On the purely linguistic level, this might sound little convincing. However, what he expresses here in clear terms are not

opinions on the language but on the speakers, and the negative feelings of fear, insecurity, exclusion, and humiliation that he experienced in Libya and that he associates to the repertoires employed by locals.

61 In a countermove, Abdelhakk seems to have dissociated "Libyan Arabic" from all other forms of Arabic, on which he has generally a positive discourse. A language that he uses in his interactions with other mobile Arabic speakers he met along his journey, and who constituted his social network:

> fī bʿd̦al-nās, ḥati ḥāliyyan **fī bʿd̦en-nās bigūlū anā sūdānī** yaʿnī (laughing) liʾan anā nitkallem ʿarabī katīr (2) faḥatta ḥāliyyan **aṣḥābī fī bārīs kullohom sūdānyīn wu tshādiyīn** yaʿnī (.) fakẖalāṣ hummā/ il bigūl illā bigūl intā yaʿṭū intā sūdānī aw intā tshādī (.) anā gullom lā anā min nījer (.) fayestaghrabū annō kēf intā/ min es-saʿb innū niwājih wāhẹd min nījer yitkallam ʿarabī (.) Fa ānā khalas nitkallam ʿanhom wagt lībiyā we kida

> Some people, even in the present, **some people say that I'm Sudanese** I mean (laughing) (.) Because I speak Arabic a lot (2) even in the present my **all friends in Paris are Sudanese and Chadian** I mean (.) so they/ when someone makes a guess they say either you're Sudanese or you're Chadian (.) I tell them I'm from Niger (.) That surprises them like how you/ it's rare to find someone from Niger that speaks Arabic (.) So I speak to them about the period of Libya and so on
> Rec 2 – Min 45

62 The way he describes the variety of Arabic, categorized with respect to states, seems to express his lived emotional experience and his feelings of affiliation/non-affiliation (Busch 2012). His negative perception of what he categories as Libyan Arabic is related to his experience in the country and echoes a disaffiliation related to his struggles and the feelings of humiliation because of the depravation of right and of liberty, of otherness in face of racism that were discussed higher in his narrative.

63 What Abdelhakk expresses here is his social affiliation to other individuals and groups with whom he communicates in Arabic. In the last excerpt, he mentions to be assimilated by strangers to a social

entourage of Chadians and Sudanese, because he speaks Arabic well[7]. As discussed earlier, these social relations seem to have influenced both his repertoire and media preferences.

64 Concerning his perception of his own language, Abdelhakk associated his mastery of Arabic with his stay in Libya, but says that when he speaks Arabic other Nigeriens, who know "Libyan" solely, will not understand him at all, as he speaks "another Arabic". He does not assimilate his speech form to any variety he mentions and insists that it cannot be "pinned down." He attributes this difference to a process of learning from audiovisual content. His language does not fit in the national categorization he reproduces in his discourse on Arabic varieties.

Discussion and future directions

65 Abdelhakk's detailed narrative describes unmonitored language acquisition through audiovisual media, activities, and socialization with speakers from different backgrounds during his seven-year journey from Niger to Libya, Malta, and France. This narrative provides insights into a complex process of language elaboration in relation to migration policies, mobility constraints, local and global hierarchies, as well as the speaker's strategies, social network, projects, and means to realize his plans. Initially motivated by his need to access the labor market in Libya, his use of Arabic seems to have facilitated his integration into the labor market in Malta. It was a tool to finance his travel, to overcome obstacles to mobility, and to build social connections with other mobile Arabic speakers in Libya, in Malta, and later in France.

66 An important theme in his narrative is the use of digital media. Although Abdelhakk has an exclusively oral use of the language, the voice-based research function allows him to benefit from new technologies and to access a wide range of audiovisual media through his phone. He repeatedly reports that he learned Arabic by watching series on YouTube upon his arrival in Libya, emphasizing his autonomy in language acquisition and distinguishing his form of language use from the local "Libyan Arabic". During the interview, he says that he continues to consume media in Arabic for entertainment purposes. He talks about his favorite shows and singers from

different Arabic-speaking countries in Africa and Asia, valuing his ability to understand different repertoires of Arabic. His use of the media is a significant indicator of his relationship with the language, which goes beyond mere communicative necessity to include pleasure and enjoyment.

67 Based on the narrative and its analysis, I have argued that Abdelhakk have reappropriated the heterogeneous linguistic resources to which he was exposed along his trajectory and elaborated a unique repertoire – an individual, polynormative idiolect. Yet, this personal language is fluid and adaptable, allowing him to communicate effectively with a wide range of speakers who have different uses of the language. In this narrative, Abdelhakk dissociates his language use from the settings that initiated his Arabic acquisition in Libya and focuses on his agency in the process and on the forms of sociability that he builds around him along his journey. He has thus developed a language in the Derridean sense (Derrida 1996), his own relationship to language.

68 While this preliminary analysis has shed light on various aspects of the language biography discussed, there are still many unexplored dimensions that warrant further investigation. Studying the different narratives of these emerging practices seems promising in various fields, allowing us to reflect on language and migration in a non-binary way (country of origin – host country), and on language at the intersection of power dynamics, resistance, and agency. Furthermore, at a time when the mobility of speakers and linguistic resources are fluidifying linguistic boundaries, it provides opportunities to observe the sociolinguistic mutations related to the use of Arabic in transnational settings, and to participate in rethinking Arabic in itself, beyond the established categories, in a more realistic and inclusive way, in which fluidity and variation are inherent characteristics.

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NOTES

1 Pseudonym

2 For an account of these agreements, see Bredeloup and Pliez 2011.

3

Transcription key:
(.) brief interval
(2s) timed pause in seconds
/ cut-off

4 The data is transcribed using international system, with *kh* for /خ/, *gh* for /غ/, *sh* for /ش /, *q* for /ق/, ' for /ء/, ' for /ع/

5 Some information about the speaker is hidden to maintain anonymity.

6 Eastern varieties include those spoken in Sudan, Egypt, Levantine, and Gulf varieties. The Western category includes varieties spoken in Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

7 This formulation may underscore racialization processes, meaning "a black 'native' Arabic speaker", as he had said in another moment that he is often mistaken for a Sudanese in France. In other narratives, Sudanese nationals are also mentioned in the discourse on Arabic as a legitimate example of the association of speaking Arabic and being racialized as black. This aspect deserves a separate in-depth study using crossed narratives.

ABSTRACTS

English

In the course of transnational, irregular, stepwise mobilities between West Africa, North Africa and Western Europe, many migrants develop communicative practices of Arabic. Within the framework of the sociolinguistics of mobility and using a biographical approach, this paper examines a narrative of Arabic acquisition and use along a seven-year journey from Niger through Libya, Malta, and then France. It aims to provide first-person insights into the sociolinguistic dynamics and factors that influence language practice during mobility. The first part situates the narrative within the Libyan sociopolitical context and migratory landscape and underlines the social diversity of mobility networks, drawing on other collected narratives and observations. The narrative describes a multi-situated acquisition and exposure to different varieties and norms of Arabic through interactions with mobile speakers and engagement with digital media. Through an analysis of the narrator's Arabic speech form, the study highlights the heterogeneity of his linguistic repertoire, the fluidity of his language use, and the processes of reappropriation and accommodation. It also explores the relationship between the speaker's repertoire and his emotional experiences as expressed through his discourse on Arabic and its varieties. Ultimately, this paper argues that the speaker has developed a unique use and perception of Arabic that reflects his personal, geographical, and social trajectory, as well as his feelings of affiliations/non-affiliations.

Français

Au cours des mobilités transnationales, irrégulières et par étapes entre l'Afrique de l'Ouest, l'Afrique du Nord et l'Europe occidentale, de nombreux migrants développent des pratiques communicatives de l'arabe. Dans le cadre de la sociolinguistique de la mobilité et en utilisant une approche biographique, cet article examine un récit d'acquisition et d'utilisation de l'arabe au cours d'un voyage de sept ans du Niger vers la Libye, Malte puis la France. Il vise à fournir un aperçu à la première personne de la dynamique

sociolinguistique et des facteurs qui influencent les pratiques langagières au cours de la mobilité. La première partie situe le récit dans le contexte sociopolitique et le paysage migratoire libyens et souligne la diversité sociale des réseaux de mobilité, en s'appuyant sur d'autres récits collectés et des observations. Le récit décrit une acquisition multisituée et une exposition à différentes variétés et normes de l'arabe par le biais d'interactions avec des locuteurs mobiles et d'usages des médias numériques. En analysant la forme du discours arabe du narrateur, l'étude met en évidence l'hétérogénéité de son répertoire linguistique, la fluidité de son usage de la langue et les processus de réappropriation et d'accommodation. Elle explore également la relation entre le répertoire du locuteur et ses expériences émotionnelles telles qu'elles s'expriment à travers son discours sur l'arabe et ses variétés. En fin de compte, cet article soutient que le locuteur a développé un usage et une perception uniques de l'arabe qui reflètent sa trajectoire personnelle, géographique et sociale, ainsi que ses sentiments d'appartenance/non-appartenance.

INDEX

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