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## ARABIC-BASED YOUTH LANGUAGE PRACTICES: A PRELIMINARY STATE OF THE ARTS.

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### **Summary.**

This paper presents a preliminary analytical overview of studies dealing with Arabic-based Youth Language practices (YL). It first provides a quick assessment of the development and evolution of YL studies in different areas of the globe (Europe, USA and Africa). It then reviews YL studies in the Arab world. It ends with a presentation of data collected during a collective research undertaken in four Moroccan cities in 2009-2012. This preliminary state of the Arts indicates a growing interest in Arabic-based YL starting from the 2000s, following the great amount of research on this topic in Western countries in the 1990s. Western and Arab urban contexts show important differences regarding the social components and sociolinguistic profiles of the investigated youth groups. However, many similar trends have been recorded both at the level of YL linguistic features and youth discursive practices. Studies on Arabic-based Youth Language practices cover a large range of domains: written and oral uses, interaction within peer-group, artistic performances. The paper questions the role and place of YL as factors of language and cultural change.

**Keywords:** Youth Languages, Arabic, Morocco.

### **Introduction**

This paper intends to present a preliminary state of the Arts of studies dealing with Youth Language (YL) practices in the Arab world. Alike many other sociolinguistic domains,

studies on Arabic YL started to develop when YL studies were already well established in Western sociolinguistics. Comparing between Western and Arabic YL studies enables us to evaluate similarities and eventual differences in terms of methodology and findings. The paper is divided in three parts. The first part provides a quick assessment of the development and evolution of YL studies in different areas of the globe (Europe, USA and Africa). The second part presents the main trends recorded in Arabic YL studies, having in mind that many references are difficult to access because they remain unpublished (like in the case of master theses for example) or are published in journals and books not related at all with Arabic dialectology and sociolinguistics but rather with Media and Communication Studies. Therefore, this state of the Arts is far to be exhaustive. The third part presents data collected in Morocco during a collective research funded by the AUF (Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie) entitled *D'une rive de la Méditerranée à l'autre : approche comparée des parlars jeunes en milieu urbain*. Launched by Dominique Caubet in 2008 with the participation of several scholars from France, Spain, Morocco and Algeria, it aimed at investigating youth language practices in France and across the Mediterranean sea, mainly Morocco, Libya and Algeria. For several reasons, the publication of this research based on field data recorded from 2009 to 2012 has been delayed up to this date. Almost ten years have passed and, indeed, the data, the methodology, the analysis might appear today quite out of date. Nevertheless, two reasons pushed me to present this contribution to the 13rd Aida conference: replacing a small and already rather old research on Moroccan YL within a larger theoretical frame. Publications on Arabic YL suffer from a remarkable disparity and dispersion and no comprehensive survey has yet been undertaken.

A last remark: the term “Youth Language” (YL), or “langue des jeunes” in French, is here taken as an easy cover-term that carries, as we will see many different approaches and definitions (from varieties to practices). It does not mean that I consider youth language

practices as separate and distinct varieties. Sociolinguists working on youth discursive practices, have mostly abandoned this former conception of YL.

### **I. YL studies in the Western world: Youth Languages and the Global city.**

Studies on YL or youth language practices started to develop in the 1980s-1990s. Before, in the 1960s-1970s, many sociolinguistic studies compared linguistic variation between young and older generations because young people were considered the eventual initiators of language change (Labov 1966, Cheschire 1986, Trudgill 1974, etc.). Within the variationist approach, the degree of use of a number of selected variables correlated with the age of the speakers was analyzed as a potential indication of a change in progress that will eventually spread to the whole society.

From the 1990s, the growing amount of studies on YL in different parts of the world (Europe, America, and Africa) adopted a different approach. Inspired by Labov's work on Black American English (Labov 1972), most YL studies dealt with the linguistic and cultural practices of youth peer-groups living in popular multiethnic and multilingual districts or suburbia of major urban centers. YL studies did not investigate individual use of variation but rather focused on the construction of youth identity within these multiethnic and multilingual urban environments: how language practices participate in the construction of in-group/peer-group identity versus the 'Other'? This new trend coincided with the high public visibility of these popular multiethnic youth groups, either through stereotyping public and political discourses but also via the mediatization of the youth urban culture (rap, hip-hop, slam, etc. cf Alim & Pennicock 2009) through traditional media (TVs and radio) and then internet (website, social media, youtube, etc.). Therefore, YL studies accompanied the emergence and mediatization of suburban youth cultures in Europe and North America (Schlobinsky & al 1993; Kotsinas e& al. 1997; Androutsopoulo & Scholz. 1998; Eckert

2000; Androutsopoulos & Georgakopoulou 2003; Caubet & al 2004; Auzanneau & Julliard 2012; Nortier & Svendsen 2015; and hundreds more), and beyond, like in the case of African countries. Indeed, multilingual African cities appeared to be very interesting places of investigation due to the spread of new youth mixed inter-ethnic varieties such as Nucci or Indoubil (Goyvaerts 1988; Kouadio 1992; Nkouba 2000; Kießling & Mous 2004).<sup>1</sup>

Today, YL studies have emerged as an autonomous field of research with its large international network and conferences.<sup>2</sup> It covers different theoretical and methodological trends.

The first works were mainly lexical compilations of specific or argotic terms and expressions highlighting the lexical creative dimension of YL through metaphors, semantic shift, borrowings, etc. (cf. the famous book of Goudailler 2001 in France). Then, numerous structural linguistic descriptions followed. They focused on specific phonological and morpho-phonological features functioning as encrypting strategies, that YL share with secret and slang languages (cf. verlan in French): metathesis, truncation, affixation of prefix and suffix, etc. At the morpho-syntactic level, YL studies highlighted the high frequency of discourse markers and the grammaticalization of intensifiers. More recently, linguistic descriptions focused on intonation and prosody (such as Lehka-Lemarchand 2017). Two main findings came out from this large body of linguistic descriptions:

- Most YL features can be found in other ‘varieties’ (popular, regional) and are not 100% youth specific. It is often the degree of occurrence and the convergence of many features that characterized YL compared to other varieties

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<sup>1</sup> See also *The African Urban and Youth Languages Conference*, 5<sup>th</sup> - 6<sup>th</sup> July 2013 – University of Cape Town followed by a 2<sup>nd</sup> conference in 2015, 11-13 Dec - Institute of African Studies Kenyatta University <http://auyl.ku.ac.ke/>

<sup>2</sup> See for example the venue of the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Youth Languages held at Leiden University in May 23–25, 2019 (<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/events/2019/05/international-conference-youth-languages>)

- YL tend to resort to non-standard ‘vernacular’ features rather than standard features.

They are clear examples of covert-prestige within peer-groups.

Because YL studies were tightly connected with the development of ‘migrant suburbia’, they outlined, from the early beginning, the importance of multilingualism. It has repeatedly been argued that youth languages are characterized by both lexical creativity and a huge recourse to language mixing, code-switching and ‘crossing’ functioning as stylistic devices (Kotsinas, 1992; Billiez, 1992; Rampton, 1995; Auer & Dirim, 2003). Rampton (2011) defines crossing as speech practices that flexibly borrow and integrate into the host country’s language salient and/or stylised linguistic features (particularly lexemes and prosodic patterns) pertaining to the migrants’ native languages.

In line with the third wave of sociolinguistics (Eckert 2012), YL studies came to apply theoretical approaches in terms of communities of practices, styles, enregistrement, voices and stances referring to models such as Agha (2004), Eckert (2000), Goffman (1967), etc. YL are no more described as distinct varieties but as practices, stylistic resources and performances used in face-to-face and ritual interactions staging the negotiation of identity. They are acts of identity (Le Page & Tabouret Keller 1985). Finally, research on YL called for multi-layered analyses taking into consideration not only the ways of speaking, but the clothes, the gesture, etc.

Two important aspects of YL remain open to discussion:

- a) Are YL strictly generational practices characterizing teenagers’ language practices?

According to Rampton (2011), a number of practices like crossing and styling are maintained in certain adult communicational contexts beyond adolescence. They tend to become markers of new urban vernaculars associated with certain multiethnic districts as opposed to ‘posh’ districts.

- b) How far do YL weaken standard norms and foster destandardization processes in the society as a whole? With the development of internet and social media, written practices - and not only oral practices - are seen as new avenues of expression that challenge standard language ideology (Røyneland 2009, Kristiansen & Coupland 2011, Jørgensen et al. 2011).

To conclude this brief overview:

Development of YL studies was first connected with the development of urban suburbs with important foreign migrant population. It then spread to different environments like little provincial towns and even rural villages showing the influence of YL practices as kind of informal standards (Ziegler & Lenzhofer 2016; Røyneland 2009). YL are no more perceived as distinct varieties. But what may distinguish youth practices in typical in-group interactions and performances is the convergence and degree of uses of a number of 'non-standard' features and the importance of expressivity. YL cover both spoken and written uses. Youth practices/registers/styles have known important global mediatization through music, movies, social media etc. Their role in destandardization processes remains a matter of investigation.

## **II YL in the Arab world: Voices of discontent and the virtual global city**

Due to their demographic weight in the Arab world, youth has been the focus of numerous sociological, anthropological, economic and political studies and reports investigating issues such as religious practices, unemployment, consumption practices, leisure, marriage, political involvement etc. and this for more than six decades (Bennami-Chraïbi 1994, Bennami & Farag 2007; Meyer 2000). In these studies, Youth is generally a broad demographic category going from approximately 13-15 years old to 35-40 y. old, because marriage and economic independence come at a late age in most Arab cities. Youth do not

form a homogeneous category but are often perceived as ‘a social problem’ for Arab states and are subjected to many ambivalent representations. In 2011, the Arab youth shift from social ‘invisibility’ to the forefront of the political and social movements. Youth are seen as the voices of rebellion against injustice and marginality and hundreds of studies investigate the relationship of youth with public spaces, youth & urban cultures, youth & social media, youth & political activism, etc. (Bonney & Catusse 2013, Nordenson 2017, Melliti & Mousa 2018).

In the mid-1990s, the public and mediatic acknowledgement of a specific youth culture started to emerge in a number of Arab countries such as Egypt and Morocco with the development of youth music like rapping and DJ, youth film, youth literature (Rizk 2007). Youth became far more visible in the artistic arena and the social media. Youth language started to be named like in Egypt: *luġat aš-šabāb*, *luġat as-sim*; *riwiš ṭahn* (Himaya 1999; Allam 2000; Leigh Peterson 2002; Rizk 2007). However, up to the early 2000s, linguistic descriptions of Arabic youth language remain scarce. In the late 2000s, the first assessments of Arabic YL studies started to appear (Hassanein 2009; Manfredi & Pereira 2013; Pereira & Ziamari 2012) but still no comprehensive survey has been undertaken.

Arabic YL studies differ from Western and African YL studies at several points. Pioneer studies on Arabic YL dealt with University students rather than with adolescents from popular areas (Allam 2000; Leigh Peterson 2002 for Egypt). Then, most of the studies analyzed the language practices of native young Arab speakers (monolingual or more or less bilingual) rather than young migrants. The figure of the ‘2nd generation’ migrant youth living in superdiverse multilingual quarters is not yet a recurrent theme of most Arabic YL studies (except for two countries Mauritania and Sudan cf. Miller 2004, Dia 2004, Manfredi 2010, Nakao 2013). This is partly due to the fact that Arab urban contexts are (or



were until recently) quite different from the Western or African ones in this respect<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, development of YL studies in Arab countries appeared to be mostly related to the development of a mediatic globalized youth urban culture that fosters the visibility of the youth in big urban centers, including Arab cities. Nevertheless, Arabic YL appear to share many common features with Western and African YL.

From the beginning, the main investigated domains of Arabic youth language and culture have concerned both oral and written practices, particularly e-writings and artistic productions.

Studies on e-writing practices focus on the types of script , i.e. Arabic or Roman scripts mixed with numbers (like Arabizi & Franco cf. Abu Elhija 2013; Alghamdi & Petraki 2018; Bjørnsson 2010; Caubet 2004, 2012, 2013, 2019; Sakarna 2006 and many others); on the types of selected varieties and languages -standard Arabic, dialect or Middle Arabic, French, English, etc. – (Aboelezz 2009; Albirini 2016; Daoudi 2011; Palfreyman & Al Khalil 2003; Nordenson, J. 2017; Ramsay 2013; Warschauer & al 2007) and on the stylistic expressivity and identification functions of such new types of writings (Caubet 2018a & b, Hirschkind 2010, and all previous quoted references).

Studies on youth cultural productions deal with street arts, music and songs (hip hop and rapp), graffiti, new literary genres, etc. (Caubet 2008, 2010; Caubet et Hamma 2016 ; Langone 2006, Guerrero 2012a&b ; Schwartz 2019; De Blasio 2016, Nicoarea 2012 & 2014, Høgilt 2017; Avallone 2019, Abdulaziz 2015; Håland 2017, and many others).

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<sup>3</sup> Many Arab countries host however a large non-Arabic speaking migrant population (Gulf countries, Libya until 2011) but this migrant population is not supposed to settle definitely in the host country. In the Gulf countries this phenomenon led to the emergence of Gulf Pidgin Arabic (Avram 2014). Palfreyman & Al Khalil show its use in instant messaging but as far as I know there is no study about a specific youth Gulf Arabic spreading among local youth.

Both e-writings and cultural productions indicate a decline of texts in fuṣḥā/standard Arabic and an important presence of vernacular Arabic (dārija/'āmmiyya) or mixed styles. Those written practices point to a weakening of the standard ideology (Mejdell 2017).

There has also been numerous linguistic studies focusing mainly on lexical creativity including high occurrence and grammaticalization of intensifiers (Woidich 2018); codeswitching with former colonial languages (Ziamari 2007, Bensalah 2003); phonology and role of intonation (Manfredi & Pereira 2013).

Lexicon remains the privilege domains of linguistics investigation because for most authors: « In linguistic terms, the most striking aspect of these varieties is represented by their lexicon. Alike other youth languages, these Arabic sociolects are characterized by a huge recourse to semantic manipulations”. (Manfredi & Pereira 2013). Non-linguist native Arab authors also consider lexicon the most striking aspect of YL, as showed by the publication of a number of « dictionary of Youth Language” in Arabic such as Ḥimāya (1999). Aspects of lexicon include semantic shift, metaphors, metonymies, loanwords, neology, euphemism, idiomatic expressions (Ziamari& Barontini 2016). Many works focus on the use of curses, slang and taboos words (Allam 2000, Leigh-Peterson 2002 and Rizk 2007 for Cairo ; Ben Salah 2017 for Morocco and several papers published in the issue of *Romano-Arabica* 49 (2019) like De Blasio 2019 for Mashrek and Biṭunā 2019 for Tunisia; Guerrero 2013 for Morocco; Pereira 2010 for Tripoli; Zawrotna 2016, etc.). These works point to a recycling of old slang words in recent YL speech (Hassanein 2009).

To conclude, youth linguistic practices and particularly youth digital writing practices have introduce important innovations compared to standard norms. The lexical creativity of Arabic YL has been largely covered and is often compared to slang vocabulary. Still we are lacking data on morpho-syntactic features as well as interactionist studies. More recent researches investigate the social values of some phonological variables (Schwartz 2019,

Falchetta 2019 concerning the affrication of /t/) as well as the issue of gender construction among youth (Ziamari & Barontini 2009, 2019, Pereira & al. forthcoming). The potential influence of youth practices as initiators of more general language change remains an open question. Unlike Western countries no study evaluate the spread of youth speech among adolescents of rural areas.

### III. Linguistic features of Moroccan YL: a case study

The data of this collective research were collected in 2008-2012 in four Moroccan cities: Mekhnes (Mkn), Tetouan (Ttu), Casablanca (Casa), and Marrakech (Mrk). It gathered both spoken and written data consisting of informal peer-to-peer discussions, facebook exchanges as well as radio and TV youth broadcasts. The aim of the project was to investigate the impact of Moroccan regional dialectal diversity as well as to draw a comparison with other Arabic YL and French YL. The original paper is a « classical » structural description of phonological, morpho-lexical, syntactic and discursive features associated with Moroccan YL. Only a few will be presented here<sup>4</sup>. A number of these features, particularly the lexical ones, represent already ‘old data’. As in many other countries, Moroccan YL are characterized by lexical creativity and a huge occurrences of codeswitching and borrowing (mainly from French and English).

At the phonological level, the most characteristic features are the co-presence of vowel lengthening + pharyngealization + palatalization/affrication contributing to the formation of a « youth accent ».

#### 1. *Vowel lengthening*

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<sup>4</sup> For the complete analysis of the many investigated features see Ziamari, et al., forthcoming. On line on <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-01858116>

Use of vowel lengthening for expressive needs is not specific to Youth in Morocco and can be found in ordinary adult speech. But what characterized youth practices is the use of a very long lengthening.

(i) žāya **f-ṣ̌ḳo::l** dīk ən-nəgma [...] ugnīya wa ḥəqq ʔəbb-i ɪla **ʔālā::ma** !

venant dans-forme cette la-chanson [...] chanson et vérité dieu-mon que super

« Elle a un rythme vraiment spé::cial cette chanson, une chanson, je te jure, qu'elle est su::pe::r ! » [Mkn]. (It has a really special rhythm this song, a super song, I swear)

(ii) rā-ni **pu::r** maḡribi, yəʔni d-dāriža kanəʔəb bi-ha **bəzzā::f** !

voilà-moi pur marocain c'est-à-dire la-darija je-joue avec-elle beaucoup

« Je suis un pu::r Marocain, c'est-à-dire, je sais trè::s bien jouer avec la darija ! » [Casa]. (I'm a pure Moroccan, I know very well to play with the darija)

Vowel lengthening can lead to semantic shift:

**mqa::wwəd** 'nul/lame' -> **mqa::wwəd** 'super, great'

(iii) wāḥəd əṙ-ṙāppūra **mqa::wwda** smīt-ha ʔʔayna

un la-rappeuse top nom-sa China

« Une rappeuse qui déchi::re elle s'appelle China » [Mkn]. (A great singer, her name China)

Vowel lengthening is extremely present in writings, in both Roman and Arabic scripts

(iv) wa **skouuuut** nta lmok a l3azzi !

et tais-toi toi à-mère-ta eh le-nègre

« Feeermes-la, ta mère, nègre ! » [ Facebook ] (Shut-up you Nigger)



(Ziamari et al forthcoming, Falchetta 2019) and is also widespread in rap songs (Schwartz 2019).

*At the morpho-syntactic level*, the most salient phenomenon is the change of grammatical categories from nouns to intensifiers leading to semantic shift and the formation of intensifiers with positive or negative values. This is a widespread phenomenon in most YL around the world. The most common intensifier is **mūt** «dead» -> **mmūt**, **mo:t**, **ṁṁwət** « trop, trop fort, mortel/deadly ».

Other frequent ones are **lūz** “almond”, **stīl** “style”, **zāz** “chic”, **wāfəṛ** “nasty”, **ṣḍāf** “disturbing noise”; **l-fəzz** “glory”, **mqawwəd** “pimp-> nul/bad”, **mqa::wwəd** “genial/great”, **ḥādəṛ** “present”; **fālā::m** “world”, **zəbb** “dick”, **rōžūla** (SA) “virility” -> “remarkable »

(viii) ət-təbwīqa dyāl l-kīf **fālā::m**

- « La défonce du kif, c’est un truc d’enge::r ! » [Mkn].

(xix) ḥmāq əz-**zəbb** « Con comme une bite » [Ttn] (stupid like a dick)

(x) hād lə-klīka katdīr ši **ḥlānāt rōžū::la**

« Cette clique fait des plans remarqua::bles »

(xi) Fin a **rojola** ? (address term)

« Ça va mon (vrai) pote ? » [Facebook]. (Are you Ok buddy ?)

(xii) fī-hum ġi *vierge* hādīk hiya **əl-ḥayāt əs-safīda**

donne-leur seulement vierge celle-ci elle la-vie la-belle

« Tu leur donnes une vierge à baiser, c’est le top » [Mkn]. (You give them a virgin to fuck, that's the top)

A number of emblematic semantic shifts are based on old Moroccan words: **itūb** “repent for having sinned -> super”, **dəmdūma** “heavy cloud-> idiot”, **nhəm/yənhəm** “to cough” -> “to flirt”, etc.

### *Terms of address and Rimes*

Beyond phonological and morpho-syntactic features, Moroccan youth practices are characterized by a high occurrence of terms of address and use of rimes.

Many terms of address are also based on old dārija words: **ʔšīr-i** “buddy”; **šrik-i** “buddy”; **šāt**, “guy”; **šāta** “chick”, etc. Insulting terms of address are important component of peer-to-peer interaction: **l-ʔazzi** “the black, the slave”; **əl-ʔawd** “the horse”, **l-bhīm** “the workhorse”; **əṣ-ṣuppiša** “the disgusting-f”, **əl-qəḥba** “the bitch”, **əš-šixa** «the popular female singer, the scandalous”.

(xiii) **ṛā-h ma nsīnā-k-š a l-ʔawd !**

vraiment-lui ne nous-avons-oublié-toi-pas eh le-cheval »

« T’inquiète ! Je t’oublie pas, mec ! » [Casa]. (Don’t worry I don’t forget you guy !)

Allusive rimes, proverbs and root-echo responses are very common in our data. It prolongs and renews a deep rooted oral tradition. Allusive rimes can only be understood if interlocutors share the same cultural references. A few examples below:

(xiv) **u hiya yšūf-ha l-ḡūl ygūl l-ək məšḡūl xāyba dīn mḡḡ-ha**

« et elle l’ogre la voit, il dit qu’il est occupé trop moche religion de sa mère »

(xv) **xū-na l-ʔarḍ-sxūna bḡāw yfarqū-na**

frère-notre la-terre chaude ils-ont-voulu ils-sépareront-nous

« On veut nous séparer dans les moments les plus difficiles (briser notre solidarité) »

It may be noted that root-echo responses are old practices already quoted by Dekkak in 1979

(xvi) *yəbaʕʕəd xabr-ək wa yəqarrəb qabr-ək!*

PRS.3.M:distance.SG news-your and PRS.3.M:approach.SG grave-your

“Damn you!”(Dekkak 1979: 219 from Lucas d’Anna 2019:80)

## Conclusion

Most of the Moroccan recorded features are similar to what can be observed in many other YL (Arabic and non-Arabic). At the phonological level, affrication of /t/ appears to be spreading in ordinary speech among youth living in urban area (Schwartz 2019, Falchetta 2019). It has also been recorded in France as one of the YL typical features. Although encrypting strategies (truncation, metathesis, affixation) were frequent in Moroccan secret languages known as *gawš* (Youssi 1997 & 2006) they are rare in our data. In Casablanca, young people claimed to have specific *gawš* in each district, but it did not appear spontaneously.

What appears more specific to the Moroccan-Arab contexts is the importance of rimes, proverbs, root-echo responses testifying that popular oral culture is still very lively and productive.

Most of the recorded features can be found in non-youth popular Moroccan varieties but in YL they are over-used. In the 4 cities we found many common features but also the maintenance of regional morpho-phonological features such as the variation *ka-/ta-* for imperfective verbal prefix; the variation of g/q and s/š. We found also many Spanish borrowings and CS for the northern city of Tetouan, not occurring in other cities.

The high occurrence of YL features remains restricted to close ritual interactions (jokes, performance) and are not so widespread in ordinary daily discussions. In this regard we



found a wide difference between the Mekhnès corpus (peer-to-peer interaction and performance) and the Marrakech corpus (daily discussion within a group of young people without the performance aspect). YL typical features seem also to be more widespread in certain types of facebook writings leading to stylization and self-staging. An open question remains: can these youth urban practices influence wider language change and participate in the emergence of new urban norms as mentioned by Rampton (2011) in the case of England?

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