

## Twitter Thread by Maarten Kossmann



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**Amazigh (Berber) languages are quite close to each other and in most places nearby varieties are mutually intelligible. They function like a discontinuous dialect continuum.**

**A loooong thread with maps (and no memes■■■).**

So can we do sub-classification?

Many people say “no”, like André Basset’s famous quote: “cette langue s’éparpille directement ou à peu près en une poussière de parlers de 4 à 5 mille peut être” (1952:1) and Alfred Willms (1980). Others are a bit more nuanced.

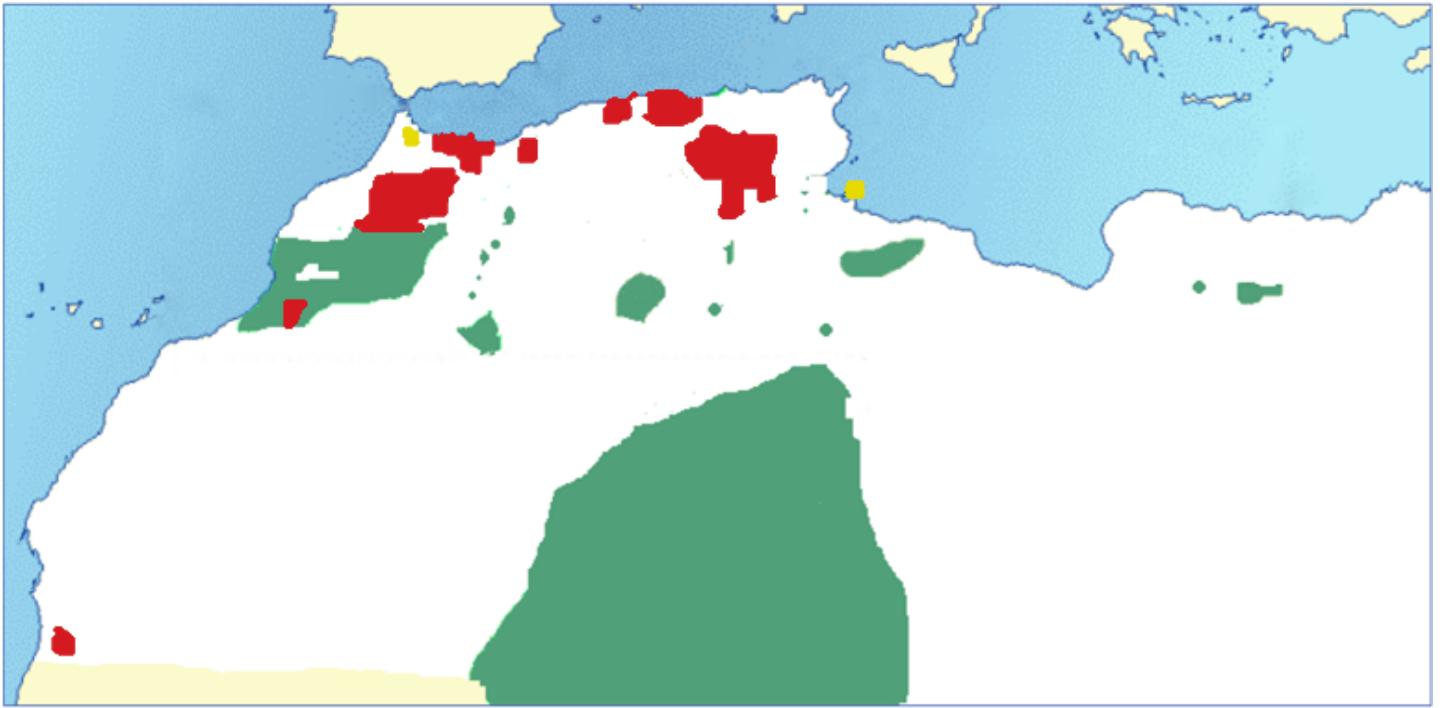
For example, the fantastic studies by Lafkioui (<https://t.co/hHKMgEPjK2>) give a synchronic classification of Tarifyt dialects. To cut a very long story irresponsibly short: all variables are counted the same.

However, we should ask ourselves: Does this continuum hide a more discontinuous past? Has there never been major disruption, or has much of it been smoothed out by later convergence?

In order to study this, one has to classify variables and their isoglosses. Some variables are continuous and can be assigned to the latest convergence period. Others are clustered in a group unrelated to the continuum. Still others are scattered.

One case of a late continuum variable is lenition of non-geminate stops ("spirantization"). With a few exceptions, it is found in a continuous region stretching the north side of Morocco and Algeria.

(RED: full lenition; YELLOW begadkefat lenition; GREEN: no lenition)



There are step-like things going on at the periphery of the red dialects: more restricted conditions (yellow on the map); less consonants affected.

The lenition isogloss splits otherwise linguistically rather homogenous tribal constellations such as Ayt Seghrushen (E Middle Atlas), where lenition of alveolar stops is found in the northern dialects, but not in the southern ones. In the middle there is free variation.

A linguistic continuum depends on the presence of a social continuum. Innovations may have been spreading until recently in large Amazigh-speaking areas like the Middle Atlas, but this is not true where groups are more fragmented because of Arabic.

As a result, we may surmise that much of the spread of lenition predates the break-up of the physical continuity of Amazigh varieties in the north. It is not very recent, although some of its spread may be quite late.

Let's now look at earlier variables: that is, variables that are found over a large, more or less consistent, part of Northern Africa, but which do not look like continuum features (although the varieties are not really discontinuous).

One group stands out. It is comprised of varieties in NE Morocco (Rif, Eastern Middle Atlas), in W Algeria, northern Saharan oases, Chaouia, Tunisia, Zwara / Ifren and, more loosely, Siwa.

Traditionally they are called "Zenatic", but I will call them "Central".

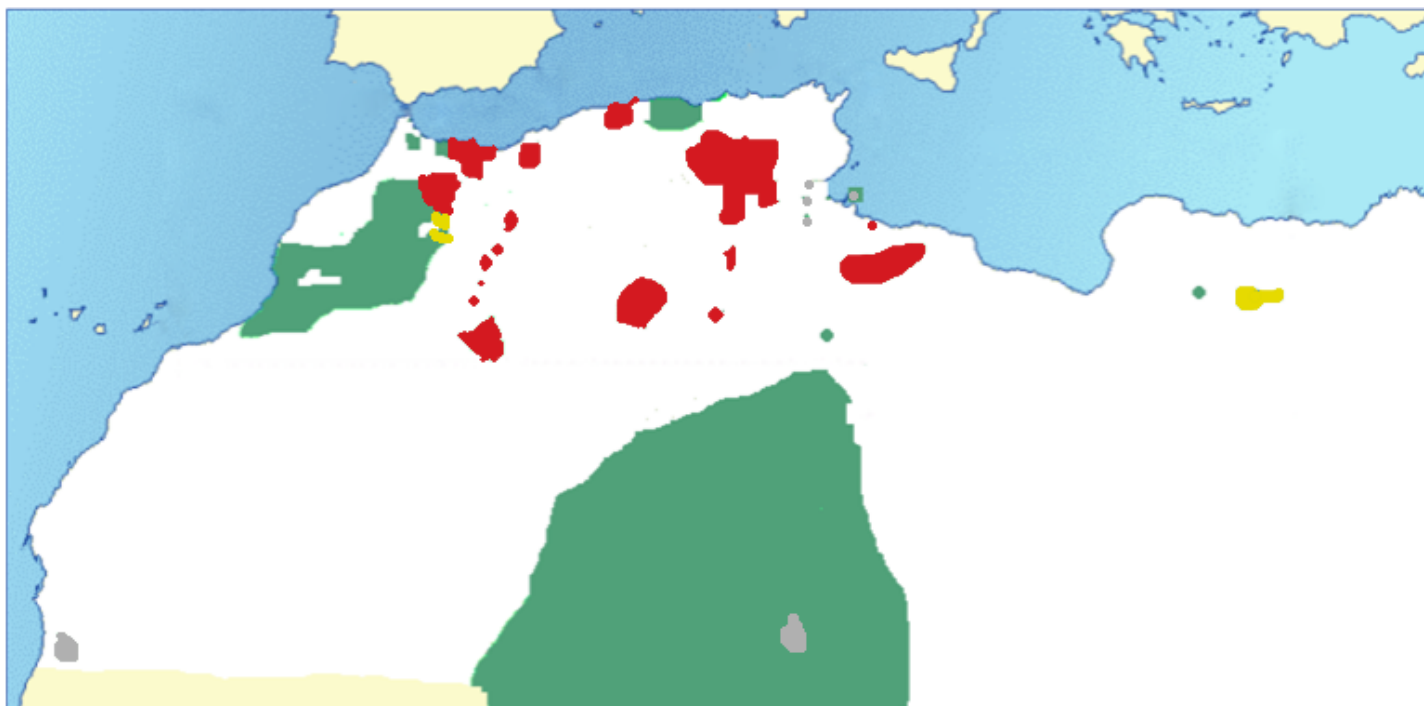
Some maps showing "Central" features.

(1) In vowel-final verbs, "Central" varieties have generalized the final vowel of the Perfective (P) to the Aorist (A).

non-Central A: CCu P: CCa (GREEN)

Central: A=P CCa (RED)

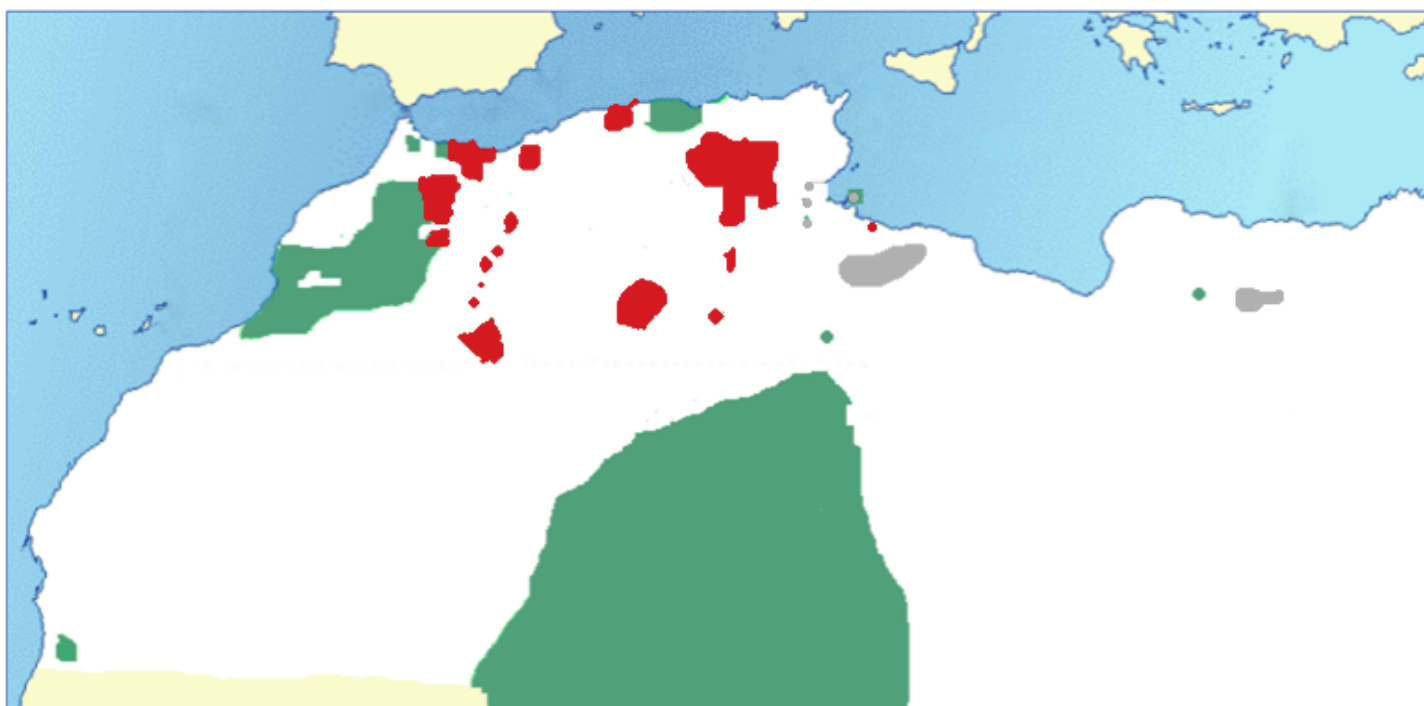
yellow: other stuff going on.



(2) Proto-Amazigh had two verb classes CC and CC■. In Central dialects the two have become identical in the Aorist and Perfective; in the others they have different conjugations.

RED: identity of CC/CC■ in A and P;

GREEN: non-identity / no data / other things)



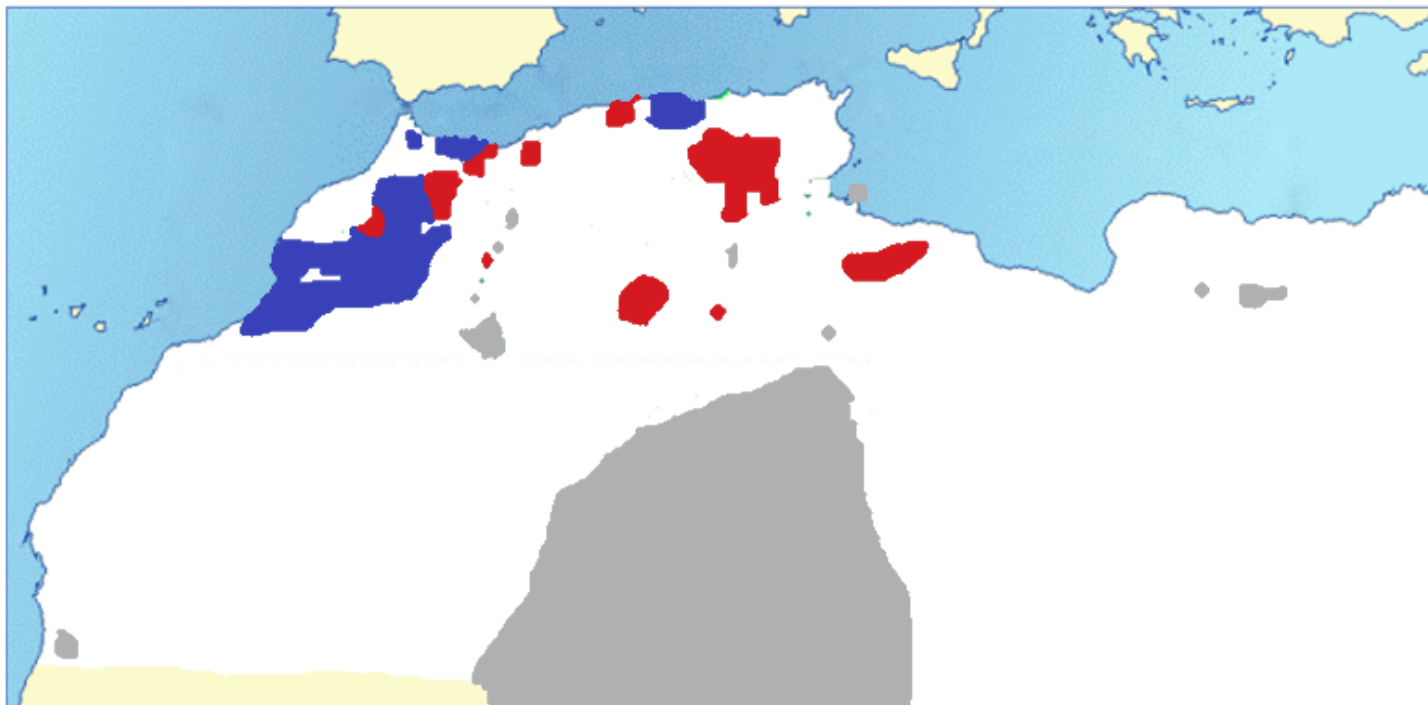
(3) Final \*vβ (or \*vh depending on your reconstruction) became /u/ in most of non-Central northern dialects, while it became /i/ in Central.

Example: the verb \*az $\beta$  “to skin”

RED: /azi/

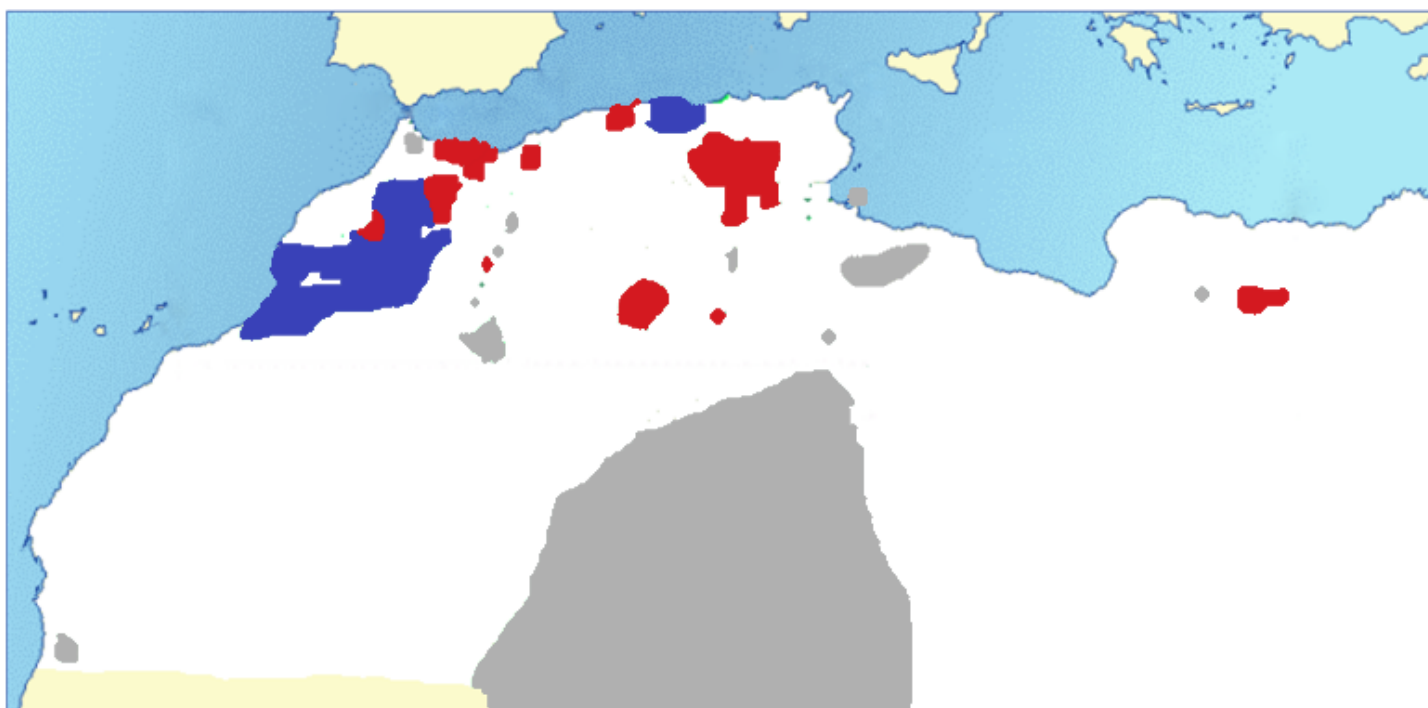
PURPLE: /azu/

GREY: \* $\beta$  maintained / not attested / no data / other things



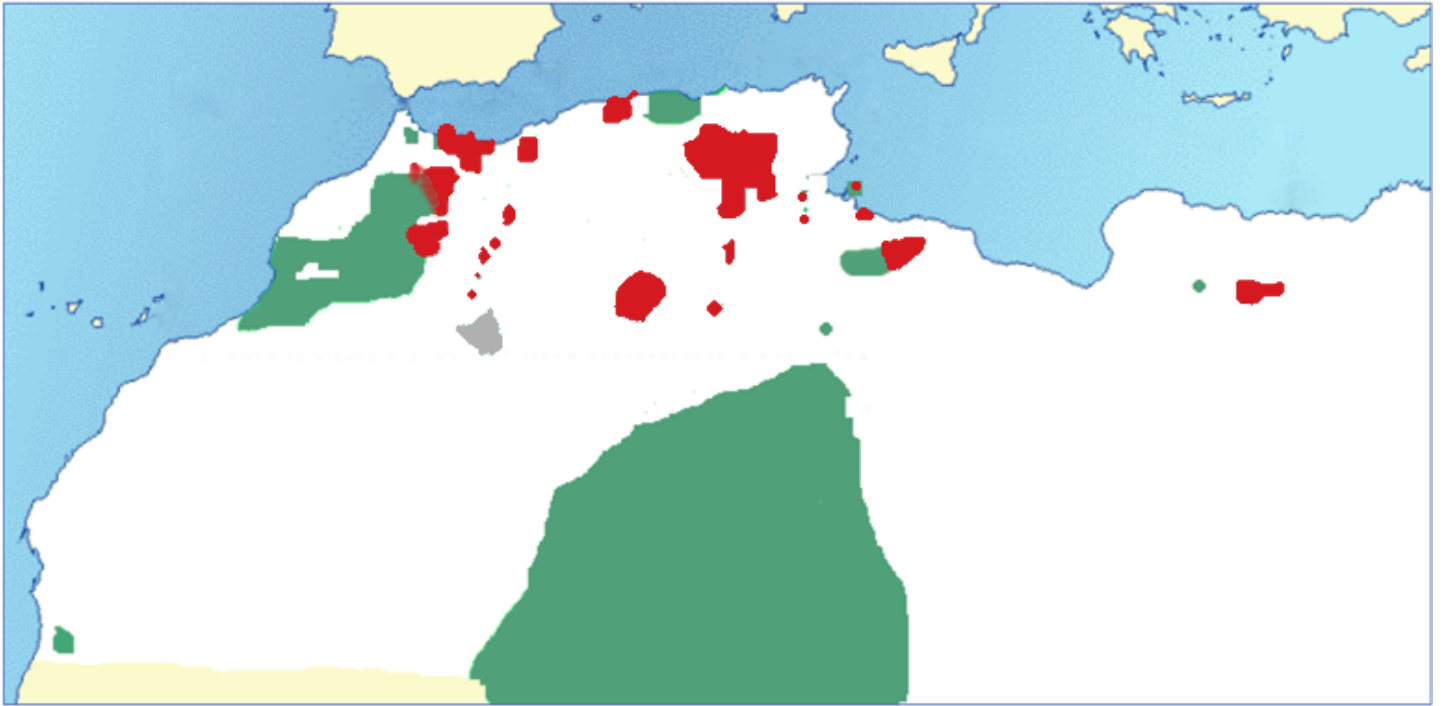
(4) Intervocalic \* $\beta$  (or \*h) became /ww/ or /gg/ in most of non-Central northern dialects (BLUE), while it was lost in Central varieties (RED).

Example: the noun \*a $\beta$ rn “flour” (GREY: \* $\beta$  maintained / not attested / no data / other things)



(5) The ancient palatalized velars (both single and geminate) became palatal affricates in Central (■■■ / ■■■ > žž / šš) (RED), but merged with the ancient plain velars elsewhere (GREEN).

NB The exact reconstruction is unclear, the existence of the cognate sets is undeniable.



All this (and other forms) suggest that the Central varieties were once a group on their own, which underwent important morphological and phonological innovations that set them apart from the others.

Variation and variability as to these "Central" variables seem to be more pronounced in the east than in the west, so maybe the Central dialects originated in the east.

Elsewhere in Amazigh, further sub-classifications of this kind are more difficult, and I will refrain from trying them. It is possible, but not certain, that Kabyle has a special relationship to the non-Central Moroccan varieties.

So far about the well-organized variables.

The next thread is going to be about the disorderly, scattered variables.

NB. While all the outrageous things in this thread are mine, most of the good stuff was found out by others.