

1.1 Background

Scope and methodology

This book is based on several years living and working among Tamasheq people in N.E. Burkina Faso (Oudalan province). The data has been gathered in semi-formal language lessons with a language informant in Gorom Gorom and Markoye, and through hundreds of conversations in Tamasheq in Markoye, Gorom Gorom, Beyga, Darkoy, Zigeberi, Tin Akof and elsewhere. I have also been able to visit Tessit, Gao and Meneka in Mali and Niamey, Tahoua, Tchín Tabaraden and Agadez in Niger. This grammar presents a comprehensive overview of the workings of the Tamasheq language along with a full working vocabulary. Both the dialects (Tadraq and Tudalt) spoken in Oudalan are covered, and the varieties of pronunciation and grammar that are found among different groups and individuals are given consideration. The Tamasheq people of Oudalan have migrated there in various waves from Mali over the last 250 years. Therefore, the Oudalan dialects also broadly represent the dialects spoken in Mali, especially in the Gourma area (under the bend of the Niger River). The data presented here would be a useful reference for anyone interested in the Tamasheq language of neighbouring regions. It most closely applies to the Gossi-Gao-Meneka-Filinge-Niamey-Bankalari-Gorom-Tessit region, but is extremely close to the Tamasheq of Timbuktu-Kidal too. The Tamasheq of Tahoua-Tchín Tabaraden is relatively close to Tudalt, and the Tamasheq of Agadez-Madaoua is reasonably similar. Only the Tamasheq of Hoggar-Ajjer is so different as to make this work of little interest for its study.

What is Tamasheq?

Tamasheq is the language spoken by the Tamasheq people. There are Tamasheq speakers in large numbers in Mali, Niger, Algeria and Burkina Faso and lesser numbers in Libya, Mauritania and Morocco. There are migrant Tamasheq speakers in Europe, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and other places. There are between one and two million Tamasheq speakers in total, divided between several main dialects and sub-dialects. This grammar focuses on the two Tamasheq dialects spoken in N.E. Burkina Faso, which are very similar to the Tamasheq dialects of Mali.

The Tamasheq people are descendants of Berber traders and warriors who crossed and settled in the Sahara from the tenth century, and of the black African peoples enslaved by them who adopted their language and customs. Thus although Tamasheq speakers are mainly found in sub-Saharan Africa, the language is not at all related to the neighbouring sub-Saharan African

languages. Rather it is closely related to Kabyle, Tashelheit and the other Berber languages of the Maghreb.

Origins of the Tamasheq people

The North African ancestors of the Tamasheq people were probably living in Libya at the time of the Arab conquest in the late seventh century. They would have had some contact with the Phoenician, Greek and Roman colonies of the North African coast over the centuries. Evidence for contact between the Tamasheq and pre-Islamic North African Christianity is sparse but their use of the cross in traditional craft and their use of the Greek word 'ängälos' for angel are pointers. They seem to have resisted Islam for quite some time and, possibly, their movement into the Sahara was a consequence of this. They were given the name Tuareg (sg Targui) by the Arabs, which some believe to mean 'forsaken by God' because of their refusal of Islam, but which probably refers to 'Targa' the name of the area of Libya they inhabited. By the early Middle Ages they were to be at least nominally Muslim and were later to be instrumental in bringing the message of Islam into the Sahel. The Tamasheq had moved into the Sahara by the tenth century and certainly by the fourteenth or fifteenth were in Adrar and Ayr. The Adrar group split in the late seventeenth century, with the group that was to become the 'Iwellemeden' moving south. It is known that the 'kal ataram' conquered Timbuktu in 1787. Not long after this the 'kal denneg' an offshoot of 'Iwellemeden' moved out of the Ansongo / Meneka region towards Tahoua, and the Oudalan crossed to the West side of the River Niger (known as the Gourma). The divergence of the language into 'sha' and 'za' dialects must be dated after the split of the late seventeenth century, but otherwise very little is known about it.

History of the Tamasheq language

Tamasheq is a Berber language, Berber being one of the branches of the Afro-Asiatic (also called Hamito-Semitic) family. Current scholarship suggests that the members of this language family derive from a common parent tongue spoken in the Sahara or Upper Nile region of Africa about 8-14,000 years ago (scholars propose differing views as to time and place). This separated into six major groups, Berber, Semitic, Egyptian, Chadic (if this is really a member of this family), Cushitic and Omotic. The spread of people speaking each of the branch languages took Afro-Asiatic into the horn of Africa, North Africa, the lake Chad region and the Middle East. Over time the languages developed in their own ways. The common theme of all these languages is their consonantal root system; most words being derived from a three-consonant verbal root. The root is inflected by infixes, vowels, prefixes and suffixes.

This timescale suggests that Berber was already the language of the North African coast West of Egypt by 4000BC. As different Berber groups settled in various mountainous and desert areas from Mauritania to Western Egypt their dialects diversified. Following the Arab invasions of the seventh century Berber has been in close contact with the Arabic language and has adopted many Arabic terms into its vocabulary. Tamasheq is the Berber language the least influenced by later contact with Arabic. A quick comparison with Tashelheit shows a very similar underlying grammatical structure and a 30-40% correspondence of vocabulary. Where they differ, it is frequently because Tashelheit has adopted an Arabic term.

Tamasheq has split into three major dialects which the Tamasheq themselves refer to as 'sha', 'za' and 'ha', or Tamasheq, Tamajeq, and Tamahaq. The Tamahaq dialect is spoken in Algeria and Libya. The two main groups are those of Hoggar and of Ajjer. These dialects are not discussed in this grammar but have been studied more than the others. The reader is referred to the work of Prasse (1972,1973) and the famous Dictionnaire Touareg-Francais of Charles de Foucauld. Tamajeq refers to the dialects spoken in Niger, as well as the dialect of Meneka, Mali of which Tudalt is an offshoot. The Niger dialects are Tayert (Y) of the region around Agadez and Tawellemmet (W) of the region around Tahoua. The Meneka dialect is called Western Tawellemmet (WW). I have designated the 'za' dialect of Oudalan Tudalt (U) to distinguish it from the Meneka dialect. Tudalt has undergone a certain degree of recent assimilation to Tadraq. The remaining dialects of Mali are both 'sha' dialects. There is a certain amount of difference between the dialect of Timbuktu and that of the Kidal-Gao-Oudalan corridor. The Timbuktu dialect is called Taneslemt (N) and shows a greater degree of Arabic influence. The Kidal dialect is called Tadraq (D). I have used this term to describe the 'sha' dialect of Oudalan too, as they are very close. The differences are discussed in Appendix I. Tamasheq people in Oudalan tend to speak either the Tadraq or the Tudalt dialect, but many (especially in towns) now speak a jumbled fusion of the two. There are also differences within the two dialects between different clans as to minor details of pronunciation and grammatical structure and especially as to choice between synonyms for various things. These vary so much between individual speakers depending on their life history that they have not been analysed in detail here, rather what is presented is a broad overview of how most people speak Tamasheq in the region. Examples are given of the extremes of Tadraq and Tudalt pronunciation, whereas an individual speaker might combine elements of both in the same phrase or even in the same word.

Lifestyle

We know little of the lifestyle of the ancestors of the Tamasheq in Libya. The move into the desert defined many elements of Tamasheq lifestyle and culture that are relevant today. The tent became the preferred dwelling, as mobility is important in a harsh environment. The turban—indispensable in the desert—became culturally indispensable as well. Camels became the most important domestic animal. A simplicity of lifestyle essential to desert living became the norm, with Arab tea being one of the few luxuries. In the oasis, hartanis were made to grow crops. As Islam became established, teachers and clans of teachers emerged. As household items, tools and weapons were needed, craftsmen joined the group, often from neighbouring peoples.

As the Tamasheq crossed the desert into the Sahel, sheep and goats became important alongside the camel. Slaves were more easily procured in this more populated zone, and these retained their traditional farming skills, if not their original languages.

The class / caste system

Tamasheq society is divided into several classes or castes. At the top are **imažāyān**—‘the nobles’, who were the rulers and owners. They made their living by raiding and by exacting tribute from subordinate groups. Next come the **ālfāqitān**—‘religious teachers’ also known as **kāl əssuk** or **inəsləmān**. These too did no manual work, but lived by the tithes and offerings of those they taught. Next in status are the **imyad**—‘the herders / vassals’, owning their own herds of camels, sheep and goats and looking after those of the nobles and the religious class. These clans were subject to the nobles, not having the right to bear arms, and paid tribute to them, but could look to them for protection from other clans. Among each of the other groups lived **inhāḍān**—‘the craftsmen’, working metal, wood and leather. The mysteries of their profession were passed from father to son and mother to daughter. Finally **eklan**—‘the slaves’, known as ‘Bellah’ in French (from the Songhay term for them), raided from neighbouring peoples or inherited; these did all the heavy work, gathering wood and water, and growing crops. Each of these groups only married within itself. In reality this classification represents an idealised state of affairs and there is significant evidence of movements of status over time. There are many groups of independent **eklan** for instance some of whom are close to **imyad** in social position.

The modern world

There have been major changes to Tamasheq society in the last 100 years. The colonisation by the French brought the nobles for the first time into

subjection to a foreign power. Independence divided the Tamasheq into several states, ruled by Arabs or black Africans. The abolition of slavery fundamentally changed the fabric of Tamasheq society.

The great droughts of the 70's and 80's decimated the herds and flocks and for many spelt an end to the traditional lifestyle. Economic migration (both short-term and long-term), to Abidjan (all groups), Mecca (mainly, but not exclusively noble groups), other cities and artisanal gold mines such as Essakan near Markoye (mainly Bellah) has become a fact of life. This has brought about a great deal of social upheaval. The spread of AIDS is now a major issue in Tamasheq society.

History of Oudalan

The Tamasheq first came into what is now Burkina Faso about 250 years ago. The first arrivals were two weak **imyad** groups, the Iberzaz and the Kel Ewel who came to the area to escape from an **imažayān** group who had attacked in the Niger delta region and chased them beyond Hombori. These groups settled around Aribinda, and are now found in the West of Oudalan around Deou. They have mixed somewhat with the sedentary Fulani of the area. The Oudalan allied with other noble clans (Alkasseybaten, Zinge, and Idamosan) themselves arrived towards the end of the XVIIIth century. In 1827, they defeated the Fulani Empire of Liptako in their struggle for what is now the province of Oudalan, the province being named after the leading Tuareg clan. The chief installed his tent at Beyga, which is still the centre for the traditional Tuareg chiefdom. Since then several other Tamasheq clans have migrated into the region from Mali, mainly **imyad** groups and **eklan** groups who had fled harsh conditions in Mali to come under the more benign sovereignty of the Oudalan. These **eklan** lived as independent farmers and herders but paid tribute to the kal Oudalan and could be called on to fight in times of war. These clans all speak the 'Tadraq' dialect. There are now about 60,000 Tamasheq speakers in Oudalan (25,000 elsewhere in Burkina). The majority of these (80-90%) speak the Tadraq dialect. Most of the rest speak the Tudalt dialect also described in the following pages. The Alkasseybaten speak Tadraq, but also their own language that seems to be an amalgam of Tamasheq and Songhay. It is very possible that they are related to the Dawsahak of Mali.

Oudalan Today

Oudalan has a population of about 120,000, roughly half of which are Tamasheq. The rest are mainly Fulani or Songhay with a few Arabs, Hausa and Mossi. The French made Gorom Gorom the administrative capital and it remains the major town. Other towns include Markoye, traditionally the most important market, and Tin Akof, originally a nomadic encampment

near what is now the Mali border. The other languages of the region have an influence on the Tamasheq and there are a number of borrowed words.

Bi-lingualism

Only a small percentage of Tamasheqs speak Tamasheq exclusively. The vast majority speaks at least one other language with varying degrees of proficiency. The other languages spoken vary a great deal between areas. In Algeria, Northern Mali and Northern Niger it is Arabic that dominates. Elsewhere in Niger, it is Hausa. Elsewhere in Mali it is Songhay. French is spoken by many who live in towns. In Oudalan Tamasheqs may speak Fulfulde, Songhay, Hausa, Arabic (from Quranic education or through links with Hassaniya clans), French (from school), Dioula (from Abidjan), Moore (from Ouaga), even English (from Ghana / Nigeria) depending on where they have lived within the province and outside. In the West of Oudalan Fulfulde is very widely spoken, whereas in Markoye many Tamasheqs speak Hausa. Religious clans often speak Arabic.

The Tamasheq language and Arabic

Tamasheq has a complex relationship with Arabic. Berber and Semitic stem from a common parent tongue but separated at least 6000 years ago. Tamasheq and Arabic came into contact again after the Islamic conquest of North Africa in the seventh century, and so have had more than a thousand years of recent contact. The primitive link is seen in the similarity of their phonetic systems and in the verbal system based on (usually three) root consonants, modified by vocalisation and auxiliary consonants. The preferred word order of 'verb-subject-object' is also part of their shared inheritance.

However, Tamasheq differs from Arabic in many fundamental ways. The details of the verbal systems are very different. Tamasheq does not have a definite article and forms the genitive by use of a preposition 'n'. In these it resembles Egyptian. Only a small number of words can be thought of as being cognate due to common ancient origin (e.g. **aman**-‘water’ cf Arabic ‘al-mâ’). The vast majority of Tamasheq words are based on a different root than the equivalent Arabic term—notably basic vocabulary words such as numbers and parts of the body.

The large number of Tamasheq words that are related to Arabic terms are recent (last 1000 years) borrowings. They fall into three main groups: 1) Religious vocabulary 2) Technology 3) Specialist and abstract terms. Often Tamasheq has created for itself an abstract or specialist term by taking a rather concrete Arabic term and using it in a restricted way. This is similar to the way English has borrowed technical vocabulary from Latin and

Greek. There is no evidence of a slowing down of this tendency and the number of Arabic words in everyday use in Tamasheq is increasing. However, of all Berber languages, Tamasheq remains the least influenced.

1.2 Using the grammar

This grammar is aimed at two groups of people:

- a) Those in academic institutions, who wish to understand the structure of the Tamasheq language.
- b) People aiming to learn Tamasheq in order to speak with Tamasheq people.

For the first group Sections 3 and 4 are most important, as is Appendix I. For language learners who are able to find a Tamasheq-speaking language helper, the grammar will be used in a different way. It is primarily a reference tool which will help you understand the expressions you come across in your language lessons and in day to day life and learn to use them confidently. For this group, Section 2 is of special interest initially, as it will help you to get started. It is recommended that this grammar be used in conjunction with some kind of structured system of language learning. The grammatical notes and especially the verb groups will help you to understand what you learn in your lessons and to construct drills. It is very important to use what you learn. Practice and visiting are the keys to this. It is in spending time with Tamasheq people that you will practise what you know and become aware of what you want to learn. For effective communication, good pronunciation is vital. Accurate pronunciation (including 'natural' rhythm and stress) is more important than accurate grammar for effective communication. Cassette exercises—taping useful phrases and repeating them over and over—are a key to good pronunciation.

Semantic overlap

English translations are given for many Tamasheq words and phrases. Care must be taken in using these. The English equivalents are only an approximation to the Tamasheq, especially where single words or short phrases are concerned. For many terms the semantic overlap is far from complete. The Tamasheq term may need to be translated by other English terms depending on the context in which it is used, and similarly may not be a suitable equivalent to the English term in its full width of usage. For the language learner time and practice in hearing Tamasheq used will help to establish the semantic range of each term.

Special care should be taken with prepositions where Tamasheq and English function very differently. Qualifiers too work very differently in Tamasheq than the English system of adjectives and adverbs. Idiomatic

translation one way or the other will often require a reordering of thought pattern to get the correct syntax. Similarly, with the verbal system it will often be necessary to think differently to express an English time-oriented verbal construction where context and auxiliary words express the quality of the action, to a Tamasheq quality-of-action orientated construction where time is indicated by context.

1.3 Using a dictionary

Like Semitic languages (Arabic, Hebrew...) Tamasheq is based on root consonants. Dictionaries, such as that of Ghubäyd ägg-Äläwjäli, list words under their root consonants rather than simply alphabetically. Thus **əlməd**– ‘learn’ is listed under L M D along with all other words based on this root, e.g.:

əlməd	Learn
səlməd	Cause to learn / teach
enässelməd	Teacher
alämäd	Learning

When looking for a word it is important to see the root consonants, stripping away the prefixes and suffixes and ignoring the vowels. Once the set has been found you can then look in it for the particular word. Note that verbs are always listed as the singular imperative.

The best dictionary currently available is the 1998 edition of the LEXIQUE mentioned above. This covers the ‘za’ dialects. For Tadraq it is less useful. However, it can still be used to good effect if certain rules of thumb are tried. A Tadraq word with ‘š’ in it may be found listed with ‘z’ or ‘ž’ in its place. If the Tadraq word had a ‘h’, this may be omitted in the Tudalt equivalent. The vocalisation may vary. Tadraq ‘ġ’ is equivalent to Tudalt ‘g’. With these rules, it will be found that equivalent terms to 90% of Tadraq words are listed. About 60% of words are identical.