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Describing Written Moroccan Arabic: Some Methodological Issues

Abstract

Although Moroccan Arabic, like other Arabic dialects, except for Maltese, has no codified spelling standard, it is used in writing by native users with an increasing frequency. Authors who write texts, of various types, in this dialect in Arabic script employ, often inconsistently, their own spelling rules which may, generally speaking, be pronunciation-oriented or morphological, follow the orthography of Standard Arabic or be aimed at distancing oneself from it. Describing how Moroccan Arabic is written involves specific methodological difficulties. One of them concerns determining a phonetic form of a given written expression (which may first require the identification of the particular variety of Moroccan Arabic it is written in), since many graphies allow more than one pronunciation. An important methodological issue is choosing the unit of description, which may be letters in their basic forms or in ligatures, letters with or without vocalization signs, etc. Another choice that needs to be made concerns the type of relations to be described; in research to date, Moroccan Arabic graphy has been generally studied in terms of relations ‘sound-letter’ (representational approach), whereas it seems worthwhile to attempt a description taking into account relations between letters as well as their meaning-differentiating properties (distinctivity approach). These and other problems are illustrated with examples taken from literary texts written partly or entirely in Moroccan Arabic.

Keywords: Moroccan Arabic, Arabic dialects, Arabic spelling, Arabic script, Arabic graphy

Introduction

Moroccan Arabic (henceforth, MA), like other Arabic dialects, with the exception of Maltese, has no codified spelling standard. At the same time, it is used in writing by native users with an increasing frequency: in newspapers, advertising texts, and literary works,

which represent not only popular poetry but also prose.¹ There exists even a fully-fledged novel (*R*)² written entirely in MA. This process of MA becoming a written language is going on without any support of the state or educational system.

Dialectal spelling is still in gestation and as such is characterized by strong variation.³ For instance, the final *-a* in the frequently used word *bəʕda* ‘already, first’ has as many as six spelling ways.⁴ Nevertheless, variation does not mean that MA spelling cannot be described. This task, however, involves specific methodological difficulties, some of which are discussed in the present paper. To this purpose, examples from literary texts are used.

1. Transliteration and transcription

In discussing methodological issues related to the description of written MA, it is useful to begin with transliteration and transcription. These two operations, vital in any study of alphabetical or similar writing systems, involve some specific difficulties in the case of MA.

Transliteration is understood here as representation of a graphic word written in Arabic script by means of Latin letters (or letter-like symbols), with necessary diacritics. In transliteration, every Arabic letter (or other sign) is represented by one Latin letter (or letter-like symbol). Transliteration is given in angle brackets: < >. For instance, the graphic word *كتبوا* which stands for *kətbu* ‘they wrote’ in MA, is transliterated as <ktbwa> in this paper, in accordance with principles set forth in what follows.

It is interesting to note that whereas there are several transcription systems for Arabic (more specifically, Standard Arabic, henceforth SA) in scientific use, for instance, those used by the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (DMG), the Library of Congress, and others, transliteration systems – understood in accordance with the above definition – are hard to find.⁵ This is due to the fact that Arabists do not need them. However, if a study of MA spelling, or any similar writing system, is to be comprehensible for linguists who do not know Arabic script, transliteration is a necessary addition to transcription. Below, a table is given with a transliteration system that will be used in this paper.

¹ For a presentation of literary texts written in MA see particularly Ferrando (2012); also Benítez Fernández (2010: 203–204) and Aguadé (2013). On the use of MA in the printing press and the Internet, see, for instance: Caubet (2012), Benítez Fernández (2010: 182–203; 2012), and Miller (2012).

² The books from which examples are taken and their abbreviations are listed at the end of the paper.

³ For descriptions of the general spelling tendencies in MA, see: Aguadé (2006), Hoogland (2013), and Michalski (2016).

⁴ Michalski (2016: 392).

⁵ An elaborate system of transliteration is used in Mumin & Versteegh (2014: 11–20). However, since it has been devised for a considerably larger number of letters and the subscripts used in it to differentiate particular letters would not be suited to our present needs, we preferred to introduce a simpler and more intuitive system.

Letter (isolated form)	Typical phonetic value(s) in SA	Transliteration
ا	[a:], [æ:], [ɑ:]	⟨a⟩
أ	[ʔ]	⟨â⟩
إ	[ʔ]	⟨q̣⟩
آ	[ʔa:], [ʔæ:], [ʔɑ:]	⟨ã⟩
ب	[b]	⟨b⟩
پ	–	⟨p⟩
ت	[t]	⟨t⟩
ث	[θ]	⟨θ⟩
ج	[dʒ], [ʒ], [g]	⟨ʒ⟩
ح	[h]	⟨h⟩
خ	[x]	⟨x⟩
د	[d]	⟨d⟩
ذ	[ð]	⟨ð⟩
ر	[r]	⟨r⟩
ز	[z]	⟨z⟩
س	[s]	⟨s⟩
ش	[ʃ]	⟨ʃ⟩
ص	[sʕ]	⟨sʕ⟩
ض	[dʕ]	⟨dʕ⟩
ط	[tʕ]	⟨tʕ⟩
ظ	[ðʕ], [zʕ]	⟨zʕ⟩
Continues on the right		

Continuation		
Letter (isolated form)	Typical phonetic value(s) in SA	Transliteration
ع	[ʕ]	⟨ʕ⟩
غ	[ɣ]	⟨g̣⟩
ف	[f]	⟨f⟩
ب	–	⟨f̥⟩
ث	–	⟨v⟩
ق	[q]	⟨q⟩
ف	–	⟨q̣⟩
ث	–	⟨q̣̥⟩
ك	[k]	⟨k⟩
گ	–	⟨g̣⟩
گ	–	⟨g̣̥⟩
ل	[l]	⟨l⟩
م	[m]	⟨m⟩
ن	[n]	⟨n⟩
ه	[h]	⟨h⟩
ة	[t]	⟨ħ⟩
و	[w], [u:]	⟨w⟩
ؤ	[ʔ]	⟨ẉ⟩
ى	[a:], [i:]	⟨á⟩
ي	[j], [i:]	⟨y⟩
ئ	[ʔ]	⟨ỵ⟩
ء	[ʔ]	ء

For the letters that are common to MA and SA, transliteration uses, in most cases, the symbols used in the DMG scientific transcription for SA. A major exception concerns the hamza, transliterated by means of ⟨o⟩, which enables us to introduce more intuitive

symbols for its combinations with other letters (⟨ā⟩, ⟨a⟩, ⟨w̄⟩, and ⟨ȳ⟩). Another exception is the transliteration of ⟨ḥ̄⟩, i.e. the *tāʔ marbūta*, transliterated as ⟨h̄⟩, a symbol intended to reflect its combining the phonetic value [t] (realizable under specific circumstances) and a close relationship with the letter ⟨h⟩ (to which it is similar in form and with which it is sometimes interchangeable). The table includes five letters which are not used in SA except for borrowings: پ ⟨p⟩, ف ⟨v⟩, ق ⟨q̇⟩, گ ⟨ġ⟩ and ك ⟨ġ⟩. Their typical phonetic values in MA are, respectively: [p], [v], [g], [g] and [g]. The letter ب ⟨f⟩ is used to mark the sound [f] in traditional Moroccan graphy, in which the letter ق ⟨q̇⟩ stands for [q]. The latter letter differs formally from ف ⟨f⟩ only if they are not connected to a following letter, otherwise, they both have the same form: ف̄. This phenomenon needs to be taken into consideration in any description of the relationships between letters used in the MA graphy. The same problem concerns the letters ف ⟨v⟩ and ق ⟨q̇⟩, marking the sounds [v] and [g], respectively. When connected to a following letter, they both have the same form: ف̄.

An exact transliteration system for written MA should also reflect secondary signs, i.e. the vocalization (signs indicating vowels or their absence after consonants) and the *šadda* (the sign indicating the doubling/gemination of a consonant).⁶ There are three signs indicating vowels, all of which are transliterated as superscripts: ˆ ⟨^a⟩, ˙ ⟨ⁱ⟩, and ˘ ⟨^u⟩. The *sukūn*, ˘, which indicates the absence of any vowel after a consonant, is transliterated as ⟨˘⟩. The *šadda* is transliterated as ⟨ˆ⟩ after a corresponding letter. For instance, مَرَّة *marra* ‘time, turn’ is transliterated as ⟨m^ar^ah̄⟩. However, it must be remarked that vocalization signs are generally used in a very unsystematic and unpredictable way.⁷ Some authors, as observed by Aguadé, “give full vocalized texts (...), an absurd choice that helps only to make reading of such texts more difficult”.⁸

As far as transcription is concerned, it should, ideally, be a phonetic transcription, i.e. consist in assigning a phonetic form to a graphic word written in Arabic script. In contrast to transliteration, which is easy to perform, transcription of a written text is problematic in many cases. Since we do not have any real utterances at hand, a system referred to as ‘broad transcription’ is used here. In general, it corresponds to the transcription used in the dictionary of MA by Aguadé and Benyahia (2005). Such a transcription, although sometimes characterized as ‘phonological’⁹, is actually a combination of phonetic and morphological representation. For instance, the MA graphic word كَتَبْتُ ‘I wrote’ is transcribed as *ktəbt*, although it is pronounced [ktəpt]. The letter *b* in this transcription

⁶ The *tanwīn*, i.e. the sign indicating [n] in inflectional endings, which is used in written MA only in borrowings from SA, does not need to be transliterated for the needs of this study.

⁷ Vowels may be treated in three ways in Arabic script. The three spellings of the MA noun *raʕal* ‘man’ shown below illustrate that vowels may be:

(i) not marked at all: رَجُل (rʕl),

(ii) marked as vocalization signs (not every vowel must be marked in a word): رَجُل (rʕʕl),

(iii) marked as full letters, used as *matres lectionis*: راجل (rʕʕl).

(iv) marked as a full letter (*mater lectionis*) and a vocalization sign used together: رَاجِل (rʕʕʕl).

⁸ Aguadé (2006: 256).

⁹ For instance, in Aguadé and Benyahia (2005: 10).

results from morphological spelling, which reflects the fact that [b] is pronounced in the allomorphs in which no devoicing takes place, e.g. [kətbu] ‘they wrote’. In consequence, what is referred to as transcription in this paper is not a phonetic transcription of specific utterances, but rather an idealization and simplification we consider sufficient for our present needs. Transcription is given in italics. Some issues related to it are discussed in subsequent sections.

2. General spelling principles in MA

Authors who write texts – whether literary, journalistic or advertising – in MA in Arabic script employ their own spelling principles, often very inconsistently; it is not difficult to find two different graphies in one sentence. As observed by Aguadé, their spelling ways, generally, fluctuate between two tendencies: “either to preserve as much as possible the orthography of Classical Arabic or to innovate trying to represent the phonemes of the spoken language”.¹⁰ The former tendency, or principle, which consists in modelling the spelling of a MA word on the graphy of its SA cognate, will be referred to as *SA-oriented* in this paper, while the latter, aimed at reflecting how a MA word is pronounced, will be called *pronunciation-oriented*.

A third spelling principle should be distinguished: *morphological*. Morphological spelling is used whenever what is represented in writing is the phonetic value of an abstract morphological unit in an allomorph not affected by phonological processes, chiefly voicing, devoicing and assimilation, rather than a sound pronounced in a given word.

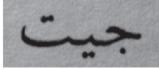
Some words are written in a way which cannot be explained in terms of any of these three spelling principles. In such cases, it seems that the authors aim at distancing themselves from SA graphy and use a graphy that is deliberately different from the SA spelling and, at the same time, cannot be considered pronunciation-oriented or morphological. Such spelling will be referred to as *anticanonical*. In what follows, examples for the four spelling principles are presented.

Pronunciation-oriented vs. SA-oriented

The spelling of the word *žit* ‘I came’ is pronunciation-oriented in (1). In (2), it is SA-oriented, i.e. the word is written in the same way as its SA cognate *ǧi?tu* ‘I came’, which contains a glottal stop, marked in writing by means of ⟨ʔ⟩ (i.e. a *hamza* seated on the letter *yāʔ*). Thus, in (2), the MA graphic word contains a letter which marks a sound absent from the MA phonetic word.

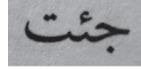
¹⁰ Aguadé (2006: 255). The same observation is made by Rosenbaum (2004: 284) concerning written Egyptian Arabic.

(1)



⟨žyt⟩ (L 9)

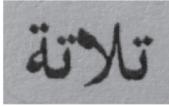
(2)



⟨žỵt⟩ (BB 43)

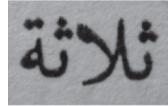
A somewhat different situation is exemplified in (3) and (4). In (3), the spelling of the MA word *tlata* ‘three’ is pronunciation-oriented. In (4), by contrast, SA-oriented spelling is used: the word is spelt like its SA cognate *ثلاثة* ⟨tlaṯh⟩, *talāṯa* ‘three’, i.e. with the use of ث ⟨ṯ⟩, a letter marking the interdental sound [θ] (transcribed as *ṭ*) although interdentals corresponding to those that exist in SA have disappeared from most Moroccan dialects.¹¹ Thus, in (4), a letter which in SA marks a sound absent from MA is used to represent the MA sound.

(3)



⟨tlaṯh⟩ (DB 211)

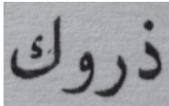
(4)



⟨ṯlaṯh⟩ (LŠ 97)

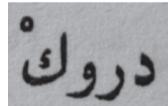
Pronunciation-oriented spelling is related to hypercorrect spelling. A hypercorrection is a MA word spelt in a way supposed to imitate the SA graphy although it has no SA cognate or the SA cognate is spelt in a way that could not serve as a model for the MA graphy. The former situation is illustrated in (5). It shows the MA word *druk* (or, alternatively, *ḍruk*) ‘now’ spelt by an author with ⟨ḍ⟩, a letter that marks the voiced interdental sound [ð] in SA, although *druk* has no SA cognate.¹² In (6), a non-hypercorrect graphic variant is shown.

(5)



⟨ḍrwk⟩ (DK 37)

(6)


⟨drwk^o⟩ (D 65)

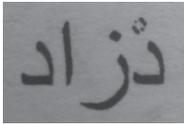
¹¹ In Morocco, they have been preserved only in Hassaniya and some few rural Bedouin-type dialects (Aguadé 2003: 67).

¹² According to Heath (2002: 452), “[t]he form is contracted from early dialectal *ḥaaḍ l-waqt ‘this time’ (less likely *ḍaa l-waqt ‘that time’)”. However, it is improbable that the spelling with ⟨ḍ⟩ should reflect this etymology, which only specialists are aware of.

Pronunciation-oriented vs. morphological

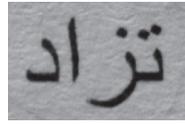
Pronunciation-oriented graphy may be opposed to morphological graphy. For instance, in the phonetic word *dzad* ‘he was born’ the initial *d-* is the reflexive prefix, which in other verbs, when no voicing takes place, is pronounced *t-*. In (7), the pronunciation-oriented spelling with the letter ⟨d⟩ is used. The morphological spelling of this word (used by the same author in the same book) contains the letter ⟨t⟩ and is shown in (8).

(7)



⟨d*ʒad⟩ (R 102)

(8)

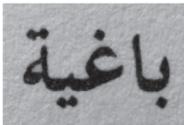


⟨tzad⟩ (R 122)

SA-oriented vs. anticanonical

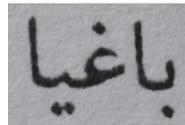
In SA, the ending of feminine participles and many feminine adjectives is written as ⟨ḥ⟩. This graphy is also the usual manner of writing words belonging to these categories in MA texts. In (9), this is exemplified by the spelling of the feminine grammaticalized participle *bağya* ‘wishing; the one who wants’. In anticanonical spelling, exemplified in (10), ⟨a⟩ is used, a letter that is never used in SA in this function.

(9)



⟨bağyḥ⟩ (HB 18)

(10)



⟨bağya⟩ (SX 96)

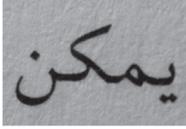
Spellings as the one in (10) seem to be aimed at deliberately infringing the rules of SA orthography.

3. The unit of description

An issue of considerable importance in the description of written MA is the problem of determining what should be the unit of description. If this unit is to be a letter, how can a letter be delimited from other letters on one hand, and from non-letters on another? Although generally it is easy to delimit letters from each other within a written word, some letters are linked together into a ligature, i.e. “a combination of two letters that modif[ies] the form of one or both”¹³. For instance, the MA word *yīmkən* ‘it is possible’, spelt as ⟨ymkn⟩, can take the following forms:

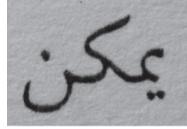
¹³ Gacek (2009: 142).

(11)



⟨ymkn⟩ (BB 107)

(12)

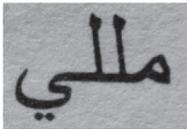


⟨ymkn⟩ (AK 218)

In (11), no ligature is used. In (12), the letters ⟨y⟩ and ⟨m⟩ are linked into one. It does not seem, however, justified to treat the letter forms in (12) differently from those in (11) as far as the description of MA graphy is concerned. Such phenomena occur merely at the typographical level and can be considered irrelevant.

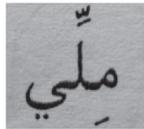
Another question related to the units of description concerns vocalization. Because of its unsystematic and unpredictable character mentioned in Section 1, it would be justified, to some extent, not to take vowel signs into consideration when describing written MA. In some instances, however, vowel signs perform the same function as full letters. The graphy of the word *malli* ‘when’, which contains a geminated *l*, is a good illustration of this point. Gemination may be marked in writing in more than one way. In (13), it is marked by doubling the corresponding letter. In (14), it is signalled by means of a *šadda*. In view of the fact that the *šadda*, a secondary sign, has the same function as full letters in this case, can it be disregarded in a description of the MA writing system? What makes an answer to this question more difficult is that the *šadda* may co-occur with the doubled letter, as shown in (15). In such a case, one of these two gemination markers is redundant.

(13)

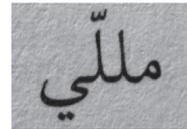


⟨mllly⟩ (R 86)

(14)

⟨m^ˀliy⟩ (MQ 116)

(15)

⟨mll^ˀiy⟩ (BB 44)

4. Determining a phonetic form of a graphic word

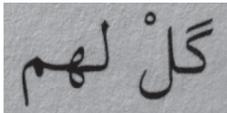
Since transcription is performed on the basis of a written text rather than a spoken form, it is often uncertain; more than one phonetic form may correspond to one graphic word. In other words, many MA graphies are ambiguous as they allow more than one pronunciation. This is first and foremost related to the fact that MA is a bundle of dialects. Speaking of one MA is a useful, but sometimes misleading simplification (more often than not the koine of Casablanca is understood by this denomination). Therefore, when describing written MA, its particular variety in which a given text is written has first to be identified, which is not always an easy task, especially as some authors are eclectic

in the choice of their vocabulary.¹⁴ If it is not certain which particular dialect is used in a given utterance, determining its phonetic form may be impossible. For instance, the MA word for ‘he said’ is *gal* when pronounced by some speakers and *qal* when pronounced by others. The graphies گال <ǧal> and قال <ǧal> unambiguously stand for *gal* because they use the special letters <ǧ> and <ǧ>, which have been introduced into MA written texts to represent the sound [g]. The graphy قال <qal>, by contrast, is ambiguous because it uses the letter <q>, which has the phonetic value of [q] in SA, but in MA can signal either [q] or [g].

Determining the phonetic value may be particularly problematic in the case of vowels, which are frequently not written and even if they are, the three vocalization signs borrowed from SA graphy and used for marking them do not indicate the vowel in a clear manner; for instance, the *kasra*, َ (<ī>), usually signals [i], but can also stand for [ə] (cf. example 14). It has been already mentioned that the use of vowel signs may not be very helpful for readers. Even if the context tells us clearly what a given graphic word means, it is sometimes impossible to be sure how it should be pronounced – and transcribed. For instance, even if it is certain that the graphic word كتبت <ktbt> means ‘she wrote’, it may be dubious whether its transcription should be *kətbət* or *kətbat*, because either of these two pronunciations are possible.¹⁵ By contrast, the graphic word كتبات <ktbat> is unambiguous; it allows only one pronunciation: *kətbat*.

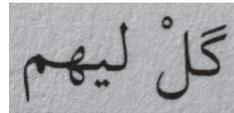
Such problems are easier to solve if the particular dialect in question is known. For instance, the graphic word <lh̄m> in (16), which means ‘them’, used with <ǧl̄> *gul* ‘tell’ in the imperative phrase ‘tell them’, represents an utterance made by a character of a narrative told in the dialect of Marrakech. Since in this dialect the preposition *l-* ‘to, for’ is combined with the personal suffix *-h̄m* ‘them’ by means of the vowel *i*¹⁶, it can be inferred that this form should be read and transcribed as *lih̄m* (and not *lh̄m*, as is the case in some other MA dialects), the whole phrase being: *gul lih̄m*. On the same page in this book, an unambiguous graphy of this word, <lyhm>, is used as well, shown in (17).

(16)



<ǧl̄ lhm> (BB 108)

(17)



<ǧl̄ lyhm> (BB 108)

Sometimes the difficulty lies not as much in identifying a particular variety of MA as in distinguishing MA from SA, because in a text written in MA, words or phrases

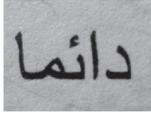
¹⁴ For an example, cf. Aguadé (2005: 247, fn. 29).

¹⁵ As Harrell (1962: 41) notes, “(...) the endings *-et* and *-at* are interchangeable. Some speakers use *-et* and others use *-at*”. Heath (2002: 222–223) remarks: “My data show considerable local fluctuation on this point, indicating that these word-final variants [*-ət* and *-at* – M.M.] co-occur extensively”.

¹⁶ Sánchez (2014: 234).

borrowed from SA can occur. Thus, for instance, one cannot be sure about the author's intended reading of the phrase in (18):

(18)



⟨daïma⟩

‘always’ (R 79)

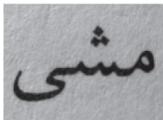
The graphy of this word, used in a clearly MA context, is SA, which might suggest that the pronunciation intended by the author is *dāʔiman*. However, the graphy may equally well be a SA-oriented spelling of *daymān*, the dialectal cognate of this word. It cannot be easily decided on the basis of graphy itself which of these interpretations is adequate.

The final issue in this section concerns differences between the pronunciation of isolated word forms and words in speech, especially rapid speech, on the one hand, and between slow and rapid speech, on the other. For instance, the graphic word *كانكتب* ⟨kanktb⟩ ‘I write’ can be pronounced *ka-nəktəb* in slow speech, or *ka-nktəb* in rapid speech.¹⁷ This difference is not made visible in Arabic script, which allows space for uncertainty. Transcription, however, does not welcome such ambiguities.

5. Rare and exceptional graphies

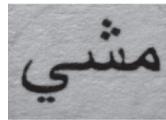
Rare and exceptional spellings raise the question about the extent to which they should be included in the description. For instance, some MA words are normally written with *ى* ⟨á⟩ at the end, a letter which typically represents the sound [a], both in SA and MA. The word *mša* ‘he went’ shown in (19) is an example of this. However, spellings can also be found in which the letter *ي* ⟨y⟩ (the same shape with two dots below) is used, which normally stands for the sound [i]. An example is given in (20).

(19)



⟨mšá⟩ (BB 91)

(20)



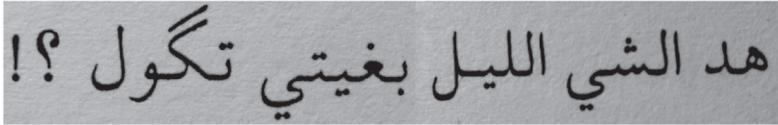
⟨mšy⟩ (R 168)

Instances of this graphy, for which it is difficult to find a plausible explanation, can also be encountered in SA texts. The description of written MA should reflect the fact that such spellings exist, even though they are rare.

¹⁷ Cf. Caubet (1993: 32).

However, even a repeated use of some forms does not necessarily mean that they are anything more than printing errors. For instance, in one book, the letter ⟨l⟩ is written more than once in words in which its presence makes no sense:

(21)

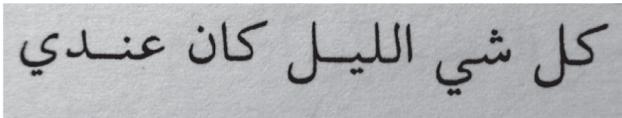


⟨hd alšy allyl bğyty tğwl?!⟩ (L 68)

had š-ši lli bğiti dgul?!

‘Is this what (lit. ‘that thing which’) you want to say?!’

(22)



⟨kl šy allyl kan ʕndy⟩ (L 67)

küll ši lli kan ʕandi

‘all I had’ (lit. ‘every thing that was with me’)

The graphic word الليل ⟨allyl⟩ means ‘night’. In both (21) and (22), it would make no sense. In this particular case it is obvious that اللي ⟨ally⟩, standing for *lli* ‘which’, was intended. However, less conspicuous printing mistakes are far from being easily identifiable in written MA, which is a system without codified norms.

6. Relations to be described

The last, but perhaps the most important observation concerns the type of relations to be described once we have determined the units that are of interest to us. In research to date,¹⁸ the MA graphy has been studied in terms of relations *between sounds and letters* that represent them (this kind of approach is referred to as *Repräsentanzkonzeption*, ‘representational approach’, by Günther¹⁹). However, it seems worthwhile to attempt a description focussing on relations *between letters* and on their meaning-differentiating properties, i.e. which of them are or are not interchangeable without changing the meaning of a graphic word (Günther’s *Distinktivitätskonzeption*, ‘distinctivity approach’). This type of approach would bring us closer to establishing a possible set of graphemes of MA. The notion of grapheme would correspond to that of phoneme in phonology; it would be understood as the smallest meaning-differentiating unit of written language (“die kleinste

¹⁸ Aguadé (2006), Hoogland (2013), Michalski (2016).

¹⁹ Günther (1988: 72).

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