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The Play on Sounds in Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub's Quatrains: The Case of Paronomasia

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ABSTRACT

In oral literature, stylistic devices based on sound are ubiquitous, demonstrating that language conveys not only meaning but also musicality. They provide rhythm and appeal more to the ear than to the mind. These stylistic devices make use of echoes, repetitions, and phonetic similarities such as alliteration, assonance, and paronomasia. In this paper, we set out to reveal the genius of the Moroccan poet Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub in the realm of phonetics by analyzing the role of the stylistic device of paronomasia in the quatrains of this bard, whose words have been passed down from generation to generation since the 16th century, providing boundless wisdom.

Key words: Moroccan tradition, paronomasia, sound, oral tradition, poetry.

1. INTRODUCTION

The oral works of Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub occupy a central place in Morocco's oral literature. They play an important role in educating generations through a number of proverbs, which contain a highly varied lexicon with strong symbolic value in Moroccan culture. With a unique style, El Mejdoub incorporates a wide array of rhetorical devices into his text. Among these figures of speech are analogies, contrasts, and repetitions primarily the repetition of sounds.

In any poetic work in this case, the collection that is the subject of our analysis sound repetition is of great importance, as it contributes to the rapid memorization of the expression and makes it easy to recall. This is achieved through stylistic devices, notably alliteration, which consists of the repetition of consonants in a series of adjacent words, assonance, which refers to the recurrence of the same vowel sound at close intervals within a sentence, and paronomasia, which will be the main subject of this section of our contribution.
To this end, in this article we will attempt to highlight the role that paronomasia plays in the poetry of Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub.

2. PARONOMASIA: A PLAY ON SOUND TO CAPTIVATE THE LISTENER

Paronomasia, also known in phonetics as minimal pairs, is one of the figures of speech that interests researchers, notably Pourchot, who defines it as: "the juxtaposition of two words that are similar in sound but differ or are opposed in meaning" (Pourchot, 2019: 100). This means, therefore, that paronomasia refers to the proximity of two words that, although they have a similar sound, differ or are opposed in meaning. This figure of speech is based on the principle of paronymy and constitutes a technique that is both effective and dynamic: it reinforces the expression, and its echo effect facilitates memorization. It is one of the figures of speech that exploit phonetics and the sounds of words to create effects such as expressiveness.

3. THE ROLE OF PARONOMASIA IN MEJDOUB'S POETRY

Upon analyzing the quatrains of Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub, we observe that paronomasia plays a pivotal role in his poetry. Indeed, throughout the corpus[1], the poet employs this device, thereby lending a musical quality to each of his verses.

We illustrate this point with the lines above, taken from our corpus:

1: Nwasi-k ya hart s-sih w s-sih fih l-mrura

Li tdan w teqetaɛ ɛli-h tati-k mn-o d-droura

I advise you, O you who sow mugwort,

This plant is bitter, as you well know,

You cannot lay all the blame on your cousin;

He will turn against you to make you pay

2: Ya zareɛ l-xir hbba ya zareɛ s-sar yasser

Mul l-xir ynba w mul s-sar xasser

O you who sow a few seeds of good,

And you who sow even more seeds of evil:

The doer of good will reap in abundance

But the evildoer will be left with nothing!

3: The left side is named and marked with the name on the right

f-lqlub ma bqat rhma suf l-hali ya l-ɛali

The bundle of turnips, wrapped in tallow, has been transformed

A prized commodity, sold at a high price.

But deep within our consciences, there is no room for compassion!

God of mercy! Look upon my suffering!

4: Safer tɛraf n-nas w kbir l-qawm tiɛ-o

Great is the heart and the head of the sons of Fels biɛ-o

You will come to know people by traveling.

[1] We have chosen as the subject of our analysis the collection of quatrains by Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub, written in Moroccan Arabic under the title "ديوان سيدي عبد الرحمان المجذوب"

To the tribal chiefs you will pay homage.

As for the proud and the gluttonous,

Sell them all off, even at half price!

5 : t-tayr t-tayr ma danito ytir mne baɛd ma walef

xla qfsy w ɛamer qfs l-giir rmani fi bhur xelani talef

Bird! My dear bird! How can I believe you've flown away!

When you seemed so well tamed!

You left my cage for another pursuit,

You cast me adrift, my heart wild and broken!

6: On r-remel, the tɛalih and the tɛameq in sas-u

weld n-nas la trabi-h ykber w ywali l-nas-u

A wall of sand you'll never build it,

For, in the end, it crumbles to dust

You will not raise another's son,

Once grown, he returns to his forefathers!

As we can see, paronomasia has proven to be the central device that weaves together the verses above. Upon reading them, we notice that the poet frequently employs this technique through a set of terms with strong symbolic significance in Moroccan culture, which we deem necessary to compile in the table below:

Table 1: Paronyms in Mejdoub's poetry and their meaning

Paronym		**Translation**	
l-mrura	d-droura	Bitterness	Necessity—Urgency
Yasser	Xasser	Tiny—cramped	Loser
l-gali	l-ɛali	Expensive – costly	The top
Shma	Rhma	Tallow	Mercy
tiɛ	biɛ	Obey	Sell
Walef	Talef	Regular	Lost
SAS-U	nas-u	Its Foundations	Its people
Balek	Malek	Be careful	Your money
Er-rzana	Es-sxana	Wisdom – Balance	Fever
l-kef	Daf	The hand	The tambourine
Rgifa	Rhifa	Bread	Delicate
Dafi	Wafi	Lime—warm	Appropriate
l-foul	l-qoul	The bean	The word

Upon examining this table, we can see that paronomasia appears repeatedly in Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub's quatrains. This wordplay gives his spoken work an appealing sound that lends his discourse to liveliness and lightness. For the poet, this figure of speech serves as a preferred tool for transmitting wisdom by helping to embed it in the collective Moroccan memory. It is worth noting that the poet "Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub," as the excerpts and the table above clearly show, uses paronomasia in his spoken work by drawing on meaningful terms from Moroccan culture. We will now examine a few verses in which the poet employs this figure of speech.

First, let us consider the following quatrain (already cited):

l-left welat shma w tnbaɛ b s-sum l-gali

f-lqlub ma bqat rahma suf l-hali ya l-ɛali

The bundle of turnips, coated in tallow, has been transformed

A prized commodity, sold at a high price.

But deep within our consciences, there is no room for compassion!

God of mercy! Behold my suffering!

As we can see in this quatrain, the poet employs paronomasia twice by using two terms with strong symbolic value in Moroccan culture, namely "shema" ("tallow") and "rhma" ("mercy"), as well as "l-gali " "dear costly," and "l-ɛali" "the high."

On the one hand, the lexeme "l-gali" refers to "something costly, but whose value justifies the effort required to obtain it " (De Prémare, 1995:220), whereas the term "l-ɛali" is often used to refer to "something very high, situated at a great height, and also something of high social standing" (De Prémare, 1995:412). On the other hand, the word "L-left" ("turnip") refers to a vegetable widely used in Moroccan cuisine. Renowned for its affordability and flavor, the turnip is a widely available vegetable and an essential ingredient in many traditional dishes, notably tagine and couscous. However, according to the poet, the price of turnips has risen considerably to the point where it now matches that of fat, which is traditionally more expensive on the Moroccan

market. He expresses this as follows: "l-left welat shma tnbaɛ b s-sum l-gali."

It should be noted here that the choice of the term "l-left" ("le navet") in this saying is not insignificant, as this word is often used to refer to something of no importance, as Géraldine Moinard [2]explains: "Since the 13th century, this lexeme ('le navet') has been used figuratively to denote something worthless." [3]In Moroccan culture, this term is frequently used in a pejorative sense to describe a stupid or naive person: In everyday language, the expression "ras left" ("turnip head") is used to refer to someone considered foolish or lacking in judgment. In contrast, the lexeme "shma" ("tallow"), mentioned in the same quatrain, has a symbolic meaning completely different from that of the turnip. In fact, in Moroccan society, this word refers to a foodstuff of considerable value in Moroccan cuisine. It serves as a staple ingredient in various Moroccan dishes such as "l'khliɛ," [4] a very ancient dish in Moroccan cuisine; as Ghita El Khayate explains, it consists of "meat confit in 'shma' fat, lamb or beef that is dried after being braised" (El Khayate, 2021: 186–187). This dish is stored in "khabbiyate" [5]jars to be served on special occasions, and it is the fat that preserves the pieces of meat against bacteria and mold. [6]"Boulfaf" is a traditional dish prepared during the Feast of Sacrifice using fat and the liver of a sacrificed lamb. Not to be overlooked is "khobz shma" ("fat bread"), which is very well known in southern Morocco, specifically in the Zagoura[7] region. It is bread stuffed with a mixture of lamb fat, onions, spices, and hot chili peppers before baking in the oven. This bread is traditionally considered a source of energy and is served at breakfast to give strength to working men.[8] All these dishes attest to the important place "shma" holds in Moroccan cuisine. This is why the poet refers to it in his quatrain, emphasizing that the "left" ("turnip"), traditionally considered a food of little value, has been transformed into "shma" ("tallow"), a commodity sold at a high price ("tnbaʿ b s-sum l-gali"). Through this image, he highlights a reversal of values, in which what was once looked down upon now holds considerable value.

Thus, El Mejdoub uses these lexemes to express his regret at the upheaval of social values. He laments an era in which people can no longer distinguish between right and wrong, or good and evil. Authentic values are gradually giving way to opportunistic behavior, so that what was once despised is now valued.

Next, and from the same perspective, we propose analyzing the following quatrain (already cited):

On r-remel the tɛalih and the tɛameq f sas-u

weld n-nas la trabi-h ykber w ywali l-nas-u

You shall not build a wall of sand,

For, in the end, it crumbles to dust

You will not raise another's son,

Once grown, he returns to his forefathers!

We note in the verses above that the poet creates a paronomasia between the terms "sas-u" ("its foundations") and "nas-u" ("its family"), which arises from the substitution of the sound [s] with the sound [n], producing a hissing, nasal rhythm that enhances the harmony and memorability of this proverb. These two terms hold strong symbolic value in Moroccan culture: The term "Sas-u," derived from the root "sas" ("foundation"), refers to any base that ensures the stability and longevity of a structure. According to De Prémare, it is defined as "a wide and deep ditch surrounding and protecting a rural property or a livestock enclosure" (De Prémare, 1995, Volume 6:4). Meanwhile, the term "Nas-u," meaning "his family," is derived from the root "nas." This word is widely used in Moroccan society to refer to individuals or people (De Prémare, 1995, Vol. 6:100). The meaning of this term changes with the addition of the suffix "u" "nas-u" which refers to one's family and loved ones. Moreover, by combining the lexeme "sas," which represents the physical foundation, with the lexeme "nas," which represents the human being, the poet moves toward the concept of "l-asl" the origin, the root of the individual. This parallel reminds us that educating a human being is akin to constructing a building for which the basic materials must be chosen with great care.

[2] Géraldine Moinard: lexicographer and editorial director of the Robert dictionaries

[3] https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceinter/podcasts/les-p-tits-bateaux/les-p-tits-bateaux-du-dimanche-25-mai-2025-4581017

[4] Hle': Beef or mutton cut into strips, salted, sun-dried, then cooked in fat and oil and set aside for winter: De Prémare, AL (1996), Arabic-French Dictionary, Éditions l'Harmattan, Volume 4, p. 125

[5] Khabbiyate or hwabi is the plural of habya; it is an amphora a large, porous earthenware jar with a capacity of twenty to twenty-five liters—used to store drinking water, oil, butter, olives, honey, and cooked preserved meat: De Prémare, AL (1996), Arabic-French Dictionary, L'Harmattan, Volume 4, p. 17

[6] Boulfaf is a traditional Moroccan dish prepared primarily during the Feast of Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha). It consists of skewers of lamb liver surrounded by fat

[7] Zagoura: Of Berber origin, Tazagourt means the hills. It is a city in southern Morocco, located in the Souss-Massa-Darâa region. This city is known for its monuments, kasbahs, and ksours

[8] Iman al-Khuzami, "Zagoura Fat Bread"… Men's Weapon Before Setting Out to Graze and Harvest Dates, Al-Omq Al-Maghribi newspaper, August 21, 2021, https://al3omk.com/672791.html

By drawing a parallel between the fate of the sand wall and that of another's child, the poet illustrates a social truth: one cannot, under any circumstances, change nature as symbolized by the image of building a sand wall. It is also important to note that in the field of construction, adding sand to other materials such as lime or concrete is essential to ensuring the longevity of structures. Nevertheless, it has been proven that walls made solely of sand have a limited lifespan and lack stability, as Elsa Fanjul explains in her article: "…sand grains are almost perfectly round, like tiny marbles. That is exactly what makes them unusable in construction. To make concrete, you need angular, irregular grains that interlock with one another… concrete made from Saharan sand would crumble."[9] Based on this definition, we can better understand why the poet states: "Sur r-remel la tɛalih w la tɛameq f sas-u" ("A wall of sand do not build it, and do not deepen its foundations, for it always ends up collapsing.").

Furthermore, this verse draws an analogy between "sur r-rmel" ("the wall of sand") and "weld l-ghir" ("another's son" or "the adopted child"). The poet thus likens the upbringing of another's child to the construction of a wall of sand when he states: "Sur r-rmel la tɛalih, weld n-nas la trabi-h." Indeed, no matter how much effort is expended to build a wall of sand or to raise another's child, the former inevitably collapses and returns to its original state ("yrjaɛ l-sas-u"), while the latter, once grown, will return to his own people and seek out his origins ("ykber w ywali l-nas").

Ultimately, through this analogy, the poet offers wise counsel: He urges his audience not to waste their energy on endeavors doomed to failure, for it is impossible to permanently alter the fundamental nature of beings or of things.

Finally, we will examine the following line:

Safer tɛraf n-nas w kbir l-qawm tiɛ-o

Kbir l-kers w r-ras bnos fels biɛ-o

You will come to know people by traveling.

To the tribal chiefs you shall pay homage

As for the proud and gluttonous,

Sell them all off even at half price!

We observe in the verses above that the poet uses paronomasia between two highly significant words, namely, "tiɛ" (obey) and "biɛ" (sell). This figure of speech is achieved by replacing the voiceless alveolar plosive [t] with the voiced bilabial plosive [b]. This change is not random, but highly significant: It is important to note that this line highlights two visions of human worth one based on the experience gained through travel and respect for one's elders, while the other is rooted in greed and superficial pride.

The first value that of travel can be defined as "the movement of an individual or a group of individuals from their usual place of residence to a distant destination for personal, professional, or tourist reasons."[10] Admittedly, it allows travelers to visit various places and open themselves up to other cultures, but it serves an essential purpose: getting to know people, as the poet "Safer tɛraf n-nas" puts it: "You will get to know people by traveling." When traveling, people leave their familiar surroundings and reveal their true personalities and character when faced with the unexpected, far from their comfort zones. In the same vein, Mohamed Merzaki, speaking of travel, says, "Travel reveals people's true characters…… Every journey must yield spiritual fruits; otherwise, it would be nothing more than a mere movement" (Merzagui, 2023: 20).

The second value is respect for the social hierarchy. This value is very important in Moroccan culture as well as in other cultures, which is why the poet emphasizes it in this verse: "To the tribal chiefs you shall pay homage" "kbir l-qawm tiɛ-o"; "tiɛ-o" is a term derived from the root "taɛ," which comes from the Classical Arabic "ataɛa," meaning, according to De Prémare, "to obey, to submit to someone, to be docile toward someone" (De Prémare, 1995, vol. 8:367–368). This obedience ensures the maintenance of order and the cohesion of the group.

Moreover, it is natural to bow before a person who possesses power and wisdom, rather than before someone who is arrogant or corpulent "Kbir l-kers w r-ras" these two expressions are widely used in Moroccan culture to refer, respectively, to two types of people: the first is greedy and ambitious, while the second is stubborn and narrow-minded. The threefold repetition of the word "kbir" serves to classify three categories of people: the leader, the greedy one, and the stubborn one. The first deserves our respect for his wisdom; the other two, however, according to El Mejdoub, are worthy of being sold at a bargain price "bnos fels biɛ-o." So get rid of them all at half price! For they pretend to be important and powerful, yet they lack wisdom.

[9] Elsa Fanjul: Co-founder and Editorial Director of Tribunal du Net, "Why Desert Sand Isn't Used for Construction—and the Answer Will Change Your View of the World," https://www.letribunaldunet.fr/le-saviez-vous/pourquoi-sable-desert-inutilisable-construction-explication.html, published on April 20, 2026

[10] https://www.lalanguefrancaise.com/dictionnaire/definition/voyage,

It follows that the poet advocates devoting one's time to discovering the world and upholding profound values, while shunning any superficial person who adds nothing to life.

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Sidi Abderrahmane El Mejdoub frequently uses paronomasia in his work. This technique is linked to the symbolic value of the proverbs and adages he draws from oral tradition. As a rhetorical tool, this figure of speech reinforces the impact of his words, allowing the poet to develop and illustrate his ideas as well as his feelings through the various functions of poetic language. These functions, which rely on elements that are both emotional and expressive, seek to create a connection with the audience, which contributes to the impact of his work. It has been noted that the interplay of sounds in a text can give it a truly poetic dimension.

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