

**The Sociolinguistic Situation
in Algeria
from 1962 to the Late 1990s**

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Prior to Algeria's independence in 1962, the French language was widely used by virtue of the fact that the country was under French rule, and paradoxically the French language has been the language of the educated elite. Here the term elite, as used in this article, refers to the offspring of the French School. Yet two conflicting views exist in analyzing the linguistic situation in Algeria. One, held by politicians, is that Arabic is the national and official language of the country, and French is a foreign language (status planning). In other terms, the political view claims that Algeria is a monolingual nation, while the linguistic view considers Algeria a bilingual country; some others take this step further so that to assert that Algeria is a multilingual country. This assertion is made on the basis that there exists in Algeria another indigenous speech variety: *Tamazight*

spoken in 'Greater Kabylia' (mountainous coastal region in Algeria stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the southern slope of the Grande Kabylie Mountains) and other scattered areas throughout the country (the Aures, Ghardaia and the Ahaggar Mountains).

The classification of Algeria as a Uni-modal or Multi-modal nation is dependent on the particular group involved. Yet the language decisions are made on the basis of nationalism rather than nationism, and besides the educational objectives of the Algerian School, the curriculum as a whole, has been moulded to inculcate and engender feelings of nationalism as a counter to ethnicity. Needless to say, in multilingual contexts, language policies (whether explicit or implicit) often reflect a power relationship and serve a particular ideology. It is to this end that the school is important as part of the overall policy, because it reinforces the values, attitudes, and policies promoted by the state. The ideological approach assumes that the educational system can have only one clear function in the development process of the child. This policy started with the implementation of the Arabisation process and overtly reinforced by the

Algerianisation of the teaching staff and a few years later by the Foundation School.

Arabisation, or else the “generalization of the use of the Arabic language” has long figured in the agendas of the different political structures to restore the national cultural values and the Arabo-Islamic identity (The Tripoli Congress 1961; The Algiers Charter 1964; The National Charter 1976). One of the major decisions that Algeria undertook in 1962 in terms of status planning was the promulgation of Arabic as the national language of the country. Yet, the question of what language to use as the medium of instruction in Algerian schools was one of the major decisions in language-in-education planning. As Hartshorne points out:

Language policies are highly charged political issues and seldom if ever decided on educational grounds alone... this is particularly true of the experience of bilingual and multilingual countries, where decisions on language in education have to do with issues of political dominance, the protection of the power structure, the preservation of privilege...

(Hartshorne 1987:63)

Although President Benbella's (1962-1965) famous speech on October 5th, 1962 in which he announced that, '*Arabic is the national language of independent Algeria*', he considered the French language as a necessary tool for the acquisition of modern techniques. In the same vein, Ahmed Taleb El Ibrahimi, a former Minister of Education and one of the leading proponents of the Arabisation policy, viewed Arabic as the appropriation of the Algerian soul and the French language as a window open on the world.

In order for a language to be used effectively as a medium of instruction (acquisition planning), the following conditions are necessary: the language must have an accepted writing system; basic teaching and reading material must be available in the language; there must be teachers who can speak, read and write it (Bowers 1968:388). However, as regards the Arabic language in Algeria, only the first requirement could be met in 1962; Arabic underwent the lengthy process of standardization in the 8th and 9th centuries AD. This produced a well-defined set of norms that the early Arab grammarian called *fusha* (eloquence in English). These

early language planning measures helped define the rules of the Arabic language. The second one was completed by the Lebanese house of publication (Dar Ennashr Lilkiteb). A note of caution is in order here regarding the teaching material; the imported textbooks reflected a socio-cultural context highly different from the local one –use unfamiliar names, words and habits. As for the third requirement, the Ministry of Education had recourse to Arab expatriate teachers originating from the Middle East, namely from Egypt and Syria. In 1964 1000 Egyptian teachers were sent to teach Arabic in primary schools though some of them were probably greengrocers ; the same number of Syrian teachers was sent in 1967 to pursue the mission of Arabisation (Grandguillaume 1983:97-98). One might add for the purposes of this argument that the language used by those teachers was heavily influenced by their local dialects. This middle east-oriented Arabic was virtually incomprehensible to the Algerian pupils. Ironically, that type of Arabic was usually identified with the standard one by the Algerian pupils.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the promotion of a language as the language of wider communication provides a

certain degree of linguistic homogeneity which, in turn, allows for quicker and better communication. These two outcomes can be considered as noble aims only if a society wishes to allow equal access to economic and political power to all of its citizens. In Algeria, however, the promotion of language-in-education policy through the large-scale Arabisation process has not been carried out with great seriousness of intent and commitment. In fact, *'Arabisation ... has been made, from the start, the target of the hijacking manoeuvres instigated by political bodies or even individuals'* (Miliani 2003:55). The plain purpose of this policy was partly to discard and marginalize the francophone élite, and to aid in the eradication of minority languages, not least *Tamazight* spoken by one fifth of the population (representing some 6.5 million in four main groups: the Kabyles, the Shawiya, the Mzabis and the Tuaregs).

The likely outcome of such a 'linguistic cleansing' has monolingual and monocultural agendas the regaining of a lost identity and the re-Arabisation or even the re-Islamisation (Grandguillaume 1983). Worse still, from the psychological standpoint, the precipitate valuation of Arabic vis-à-vis French and the other local varieties created a situation of

general malaise which can be described in terms of linguistic imperialism. Here the notion of imperialism is similar to that of Phillipson (1992), but one might argue that Phillipson's terminology is slightly patronizing. Paradoxically, the linguistic variety is felt by the hard-liners of nationalism and homogeneity as a major flaw than a richness of the country (Miliani 2003).

According to Jernudd and Das Gupta (1971), one of the major benefits of language planning is by promoting the use of a particular language, it can foster a sense of national consciousness, thus reinforcing the political unity of the country. Paradoxically, in Algeria the promotion of Arabic as the national and official language has had a divisive effect; it has undermined rather than strengthened political unity. Thus, the government policy of promoting a national identity through its Arabisation process has not resulted in political unity, but engendered resistance and, at times, great hostility among some members of the society; the 1963 revolt in Kabylia led by Ait Ahmed (a pioneer of the Algerian revolution), the famous 1980-Berber Spring and the social and political upheavals, which have become commonplace in Greater Kabylia, are aspects of the fragility that characterizes

Algeria's notion of national pride and unity. This also shows the complex relationship between language planning, nationalism and political unity. On the other hand, it gives a fair picture of the pan-Berber identity clinging tenaciously to their distinctive culture and language.

From 1971 onwards Arabic replaced French as the medium of instruction in primary schools; by 1976 all Middle-school education was conducted in Arabic; by 1984 all Secondary education, and by 1986 most university education had undergone this change. This policy of acquisition planning, the strategy to increase the use and users of a language through language teaching, has received a cold welcome from the francophones, who have previously enjoyed privilege and high status –*the cream of the crop* –, felt threatened by the newly revived language (Classical Arabic). Fearing the loss of their position, the élite views that the acquisition of French as '*un butin de guerre*'-a war booty, to use Kateb Yacine's (an Algerian writer) famous terms, therefore a treasured possession, as well as a key to economic betterment and modernization, intellectual pursuits and progressive values, and personal development, hence a compromise for some time to come. As Miliani rightly puts

it, *'French is no longer the property of the old enemy. French as a world language is a tool (linguistic, cultural, social, economic and technical) for humanity, beyond the political borders* (Miliani 2001:17).

The friction caused by the use of Arabic in schools and some public sectors has made language policy a thorny and very sensitive issue. These changes in language policy have systematically affected the role and status of French in Algeria. Consequently, the use of Arabic as a language of wider communication is on the increase. Similarly in the public sector, since all the official documents must be written in Arabic, the use of French is on the wane. In short then, the policy of favouring Arabic, explicitly, has devalued the French language, and to a lesser extent, the other indigenous languages. Some proponents and reform-initiators of the Arabisation policy have, at times, felt obliged to closely associate the revival of classical Arabic with not only the demise of the French language, but to the down-grading of their own mother tongue: Algerian dialectal Arabic or Berber.

However, the value of the French language as an important international language has continued to be

recognized. French is to be kept as a second language. But the term “second language” as used to refer to French in the Algerian context has to be qualified, as it does not refer to a second language in the true linguistic sense. Instead the term is used to mean that French is second to Arabic in importance for official purposes. It is in keeping with this policy of maintaining French as a second language that it is still taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary education. Thus it is that Taleb Ibrahimi argues that:

Oscillating constantly between the status of a second language and that of a privileged foreign language, between the denial, the expressiveness of its symbolic power and the reality of its use, the ambiguity of the place assigned to the French language is one of the marked facts of the Algerian situation.

(Taleb Ibrahimi 1995:50)

Attitudes towards French in a country like Algeria can differ greatly depending on the ethnic and linguistic background of the individual. Among those who support the promotion of Arabic as a sign of allegiance and a way of achieving a unique national identity, like the arabophones,

the use of French may be viewed as a sign of disloyalty to the mainstream political discourse and an impediment to the building of the of sense of nationalism. On the other hand, among those who do not identify with the major ethnic groups, as is the case with many of the Kabylis, French may be valued as promoting a neutral medium of instruction in schools and in administration. This divide-to-rule policy had notably led to extremism of thoughts and practices to the extent that the francophones have been labeled the Party of France (Hizb Fransa), i.e. missionaries for the cultural heritage that is enshrined in the French language .

However, it is a common perception among some Algerians that the substitution of the French language by Arabic as the medium of instruction has led to falling educational standards. Actually, language-wise, a high percentage of students and graduates have developed a low level of language proficiency, which degenerated into what Brann (1990) has termed 'semilingualism', i.e. the inability to use fluently two different languages one is supposed to master. Knowledge-wise, the results are not any better in formal exams. On the other hand, one important issue in language planning is clearly the question of nationism versus

nationalism. The role and status of Arabic and French in Algeria are largely dependent on the political and social structure. Yet, this is not the only factor which influences language policies, equally important is the economic context which can promote or undermine the spread of a language.

The choice of a 'national' and 'official' language might appear, at first sight, to be a very simple one. The terms 'national' and 'official' are in quotation marks for a good reason: it is possible to follow Fishman (1971:32) and maintain the term 'national language' chosen for the achievement of nationalism, i.e. a language selected on basis of considerations of national identity, in contrast with the 'official language' which has the nationism function, i.e. a language used in the business of government (legislative, executive, and judicial). However, the choice of Arabic placed a handful of its users, (not speakers as L1) proportionally speaking at a substantial advantage, the distribution of the rent in the 1970s and 1980s in the form of scholarships abroad for their children and family members, housing, VIP status and other gains. The minority groups felt themselves to be at a disadvantage and argued that independence for them had resulted in no more than an

exchange of masters. Leibowitz contends that *There is usually more at issue than just language, because decisions about language often lead to benefits for some and loss of privilege, status, and rights for others* (Leibowitz cited in Wiley 1996:104). The *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* defines language planning as 'A *deliberate, systematic, and theory-based attempt to solve communication problems of a community by studying the various languages or dialects it uses, and developing a policy concerning their selection and use.*' (Bright 1992 Vol.4:310-311).

In pursuing this end, language planning attempts to produce social beneficial results becomes therefore 'synonymous with the rehabilitation of minority languages through a system of maintenance and preservation' (Miliani 2001:15). Unfortunately, as supportive measures to the Arabisation process, edicts were passed against the use of *Tamazight* and other identity-depriving language varieties on Radio and TV networks. The imposition of a one-language-only-policy has ever been more a problem than a solution. There is a general consensus that the Arabisation policy, implemented on the basis of political directives rather than

linguistic or pedagogical criteria, has been fundamentally related to attempts to deprive the élite of access, status and power. Worse still, the proponent of Arabisation have used a narrowly nationalistic ideology as a way to justify it, but as a source of legitimacy for any power they would get (Miliani 2003). In sum then, the noble socio-cultural project has deliberately been deviated from its original dimension, in the sense that Arabic has been manipulated for instrumental and goal-seeking reasons.

However, no sooner had the Arabisation process been launched (in 1971) that it confronted serious problems and turned out to be a problematical issue. It is to this point that divergent views have been expressed as an explanation of why the local language varieties have not been accepted as media of instruction. Through corpus planning, one might argue that, *'The vernaculars in use might have known a different development had they been employed in the public life (in the media) or even in the educational system'* (Miliani 2001:15). Arguably, the most single important decision that might be taken to enhance the educational prospect of children would be for educational institutions to value and use the child's native language as resources in the

classroom rather than as obstacles to learning. Many education specialists maintain that early education succeeds best if conducted in the child's native language. More than forty years ago, specialists at a UNESCO conference stated their unequivocal support for the use of mother tongue or vernacular education programmes in a now-classic statement: *"It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child to read is his mother tongue."* Following the major shift to Arabic as the sole medium of instruction in Primary, Middle and Secondary, some teachers, who were neither adequately prepared for the sudden transition nor linguistically equipped to explain effectively in Arabic the new concepts in the various content subjects such as natural sciences, mathematics and physics, solicited administrative positions such as principals, assistant principals and headmasters, while others pre-retired or simply switched to other professions.

From a linguistic standpoint, Algerian dialectal Arabic shares many of the language features of Arabic, but differs considerably from it in the degree to which it is mixed and reduced in its structure. In comparison with Arabic, Algerian dialectal Arabic demonstrates large-scale borrowing - from the French language - and reduction in the sense that the

grammar, phonology and lexis contain a smaller number of items and processes than those found in Arabic. However, in some instances, the patterns of disjunction between Arabic and Algerian dialectal Arabic go far beyond the levels of phonology, morphology, word order and phrase structure. The following example illustrates such discourse-level differences: *wash baghi eddir* (what do you want to do). These discourse-level differences are all too often neither recognized nor honored in academic settings. The resistance is related more to political considerations aiming at developing negative attitudes towards the local varieties than to any systematic evaluation of their effectiveness as languages of instructions. Put simply, the language policy in Algeria clearly defines Arabic as the supprestratum (lexifier language) and the other varieties as substrata.

On the other hand, although there are differences between Berbers and Arabs, they have cross-linguistic/cultural similarities, for example, *aireuj* (colander); *aghlal* (snail); *khemmal* (cleaner) (cf. Benrabah 1999:70). The underlying similarities between Algerian dialectal Arabic and Berber might be explained in part by the common presence of both communities (exogamy) and are traceable

mostly to a common religious source. In this very specific context Abdelhamid Ibn Babis, the founding father of the Ouléma Association in 1931, posited that, '*we are a Berber people who have been Arabised by Islam*'. Furthermore, a common feature of Algerian dialectal Arabic and Berber is the occurrence of French words with the general syntax of the mother tongue, in the sense that dialectal Arabic and Berber provide the morphological empty framework which carries the semantically full lexis of the French language, e.g. *estylouyet/istylouyen* (pens), *cousina/tacousinet* (kitchen) (cf. Benrabah op. cit.).

Arguably, such dramatic word- and sentence- level differences between Arabic and the local language varieties are significant enough to pose an instructional barrier. The Algerian school's primary task is to provide access to the language of wider use so that the child becomes a fully participating member of a wider community. Paradoxically, there was general agreement at a Cairo meeting that the low achievement rates in schools in many Arab countries are directly related to the difficulty of learning to read in Arabic. When transferred to the classroom Arabic, with its highly differentiated grammar and lexis from its dialectal varieties,

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