

# A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Arabic Diglossia inside the Classroom: Tlemcen Speech Community as a Case in Point

Chahrazed HAMZAOU  
(chahrazed\_hamzaoui@yahoo.fr)

Belhadj Bouchaïb  
University/ Algeria

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## Abstract (English):

This study scrutinized the effects of Arabic diglossia on pupils' linguistic achievement and the factors that hinder their academic success. Data were gathered via classroom observation which allowed the researcher to detect the pupils' linguistic flaws when learning Modern Standard Arabic. The findings revealed that pupils spent strenuous efforts to communicate in Modern Standard Arabic as learning this variety seems like learning a new language. The findings also disclosed that the teachers' mixture between the two forms of Arabic, when presenting their lessons, could only aggravate the situation. Hence, some recommendations and tips were provided to mitigate diglossia inside the classroom.

**Keywords:** Algerian Arabic; Arabic diglossia; classroom; Modern Standard Arabic; pupils

## ملخص باللغة العربية

تستعرض هذه الدراسة آثار ازدواجية اللغة العربية على الأداء اللغوي للتلاميذ و العوامل التي تمنع تفوقهم في الدراسة. لقد تم جمع البيانات عن طريق المراقبة في القسم التي سمحت للباحث بتحليل الصعوبات اللغوية للتلاميذ عند تعلم اللغة العربية الفصحى. أظهرت النتائج أن التلاميذ من مختلف الدرجات، استعملوا مجهودات باهظة للتواصل باللغة العربية الفصحى لأنها تعتبر مثل تعلم لغة جديدة كما أن استعمال الفصحى والدارجة معا من طرف الأساتذة عند تقديم دروسهم، يزيد في تدعيم صعوبة الوضع. وبناء على ذلك بعض التوصيات والنصائح مقدمة من أجل تخفيض حدوث هذا النمط داخل القسم وتعزيز القدرات اللغوية للتلاميذ.

كلمات مفتاحية: الدارجة؛ ازدواجية اللغة العربية ؛ القسم ؛ الفصحى ؛ التلاميذ

## Introduction

One of the significant areas of study in sociolinguistics is the phenomenon of diglossia which has a major impact on the teaching/ learning process. In fact, an important issue characterizing Algerian formal education lies in the language which is prescribed in the official text as the language of instruction differs to a large extent from pupils' mother tongue, at all linguistic levels, phonology, morphology, vocabulary, grammar and syntax. Arabic diglossia has a strong impact on the educational sector since the vernacular or at least the 'middle language' seem to occupy an important place in the verbal expressions used by teachers in miscellaneous classroom contexts. Pupils' incompetence in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) clearly appears in their disability in communication skills since they are unable to find the accurate lexical items to express themselves in classroom interaction. The present study, firstly, aims at exploring the variety of Arabic used by Arabic course teachers when presenting their lessons; secondly, it aims at verifying the extent to which pupils use MSA in classroom interaction and finally it seeks to detect the main reasons that stand behind their linguistic flaws. Such considerations have led to a number of questionings formulated as follows:

- 1- Which form of Arabic do teachers tend to use when presenting their lessons?
- 2- To what extent do pupils use MSA when interacting with their teachers inside the classroom?
- 3- What principal reasons stand behind the pupils' linguistic flaws, especially when asked to use MSA only?

Answers to these questionings will be provided via classroom observation results.

### 1. Diglossia

The most common view is that the term 'diglossia' was first used in an (1930-1931) article written by the French dialectologist William Marçais in which he accounted for the linguistic situation in Algeria at that time. The term 'diglossia', modelled on the French 'diglossie', was first introduced into the English literature on sociolinguistics by Ferguson (1959) in his famous article 'Diglossia' in *Word* to include a situation "where two varieties of a language exist side by side throughout the community , with each having a definite role to play" (Ferguson, 1972, p.32). Following Ferguson's viewpoint, the key element in 'diglossia' is the coexistence of two distinct

language forms throughout one speech community. One form is known as the high variety, H and the other one the low variety, L, with each variety having its own specialized functions. He (1959, p. 245) says that: "One of the most important features of diglossia is the specialization of function for H and L". The High variety, H, is used only on formal and public occasions, while the Low variety, L, is used under normal, everyday circumstances.

Before formal instruction, some children may learn H, but many have little or no exposure to it. Therefore, the two varieties are not considered as having the same degree of prestige. As an illustration, this diglossic situation may also be found in Algeria, where both MSA and colloquial Arabic are used. Ferguson believes that 'diglossia' exists when the speech community is characterized by the following situations:

- (a) existence of primary dialects (Low variety, L);
- (b) existence of a secondary variety superposed to dialects (High variety, H);
- (c) stable coexistence of L and H;
- (d) H is a cognate language of L but it is structurally distant from the latter;
- (e) H vehicles a prestigious literary tradition;
- (f) H is highly codified and standardised;
- (g) H is learnt at school through formal education;
- (h) H is used in almost all (i) written situations (ii) formal spoken situations;
- (i) H is never used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation.

Ferguson's original version of diglossia has been criticized and discussed extensively by Ferguson himself who has recognized some weaknesses in his article titled 'Diglossia Revisited' (1991) and published in *The Southwest Journal of Linguistics*. This study is based on the revisited version of diglossia. Indeed, the emergence of a new variety of Arabic -which is believed to exist between MSA and the vernacular- known as 'the middle language' (Al-Batal, 2006), or 'Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), seems to be the predominant variety used in semi-formal situations especially by educated people.

## 2. Diglossia in Arabic

One of the most important characteristics of Arabic diglossia which is directly implicated for the acquisition of literacy skills is the establishment of rigid and complementary functional separation of

two linguistic codes: the written and the spoken (Ferguson, 1959). The standardization of the Arabic language, which started in the 8th and 9th centuries AD has given birth to a set of norms that the early grammarians called *fusha* (Maamouri, 1998). '*al-fusha*' represents the high variety and is also called, *Modern Standard Arabic* (MSA) or Literary Arabic, a modern descendant of classical Arabic (the language of the Qur'an), which is used in education, administration, literature, and in formal oral discourse. This variety that all Arab countries share alternates with *al ammiya*, also referred to as the low variety used for daily conversations and matters.

There is a general agreement amongst most, if not all Arabs, that the vernacular should not be adopted as, an official language by any Arab country, as this would entail 'undesirable' results. The study conducted by Zughoul (1980) is particularly relevant to this idea:

- MSA would eventually disappear to be replaced by the local vernaculars, in the same fashion as Latin died with the advent of Romance languages, so the 'unifying force' guaranteed by the lingua franca would no longer exist;

- This scenario runs counter the principles of Islam (which exalts Arabic as the 'perfect' language) because it would lead to the eventual 'unintelligibility of the Qur'an and the vanishing of 'Arab traditions and culture', a fact which could be then exploited by 'Western colonialists' to dominate the Arab peoples;

- The local idioms are not sophisticated enough to provide adequate means of communication.

The first two points mentioned above are much more related to religious and ideological grounds, whereas the latter reveals that the regional dialects have never enjoyed a regular written form.

Another variety of Arabic has emerged from the coalescence between CA and colloquial Arabic. Mahmoud (1986, p. 239) points out that "the emergence of a new, intermediate form of Arabic called Educated Spoken Arabic is commonly cited as evidence that the diglossic situation is undergoing a dramatic change". Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA) is defined as "a supra-regional, prestige form of spoken Arabic practical as a means of communication throughout the Arabic speaking world" (Ryding, 1991, p.212). MSA, ESA and colloquial Arabic seem to create a continuum from which native speakers may choose the appropriate variety at distinct times and occasions. Badawi (1994) spoke about different levels of Arabic instead of only two forms. This is the main

reason why various scholars prefer the characterization of the Arabic linguistics as a spectrum, a continuum, or a diglossic continuum (Holes 1995; Younes, 2006).

### 3. Diglossia and Education

Today, a growing body of evidence that diglossia in Arabic is one of the major linguistic issues confronting the Arab world which has a great impact on the social, psychological and educational aspects of the society. Zughoul (1980) is one of the prominent scholars who considers the high rate of illiteracy in any speech community as one of the most challenging reasons behind the expansion of the linguistic distance between MSA and the vernaculars in the Arab world. Maamouri (1998, pp. 27-28) establishes four areas that engender important language interference when children try to make the transition from their mother tongue to MSA. They are as follows:

1. Important lexical differences even in commonplace everyday words and functional terms;
2. Inflections denoting gender, number and tense, most of which have disappeared from all the colloquial Arabic dialects;
3. Important varying changes in phonological structure with sounds in writing which have dropped out of everyday usage;
4. A lack of unified *Fusha* Arabic scientific vocabulary at various levels of the curriculum.

Arab children in general and Algerian pupils in particular encounter various flaws in learning MSA because it seems like learning 'a new Language'. In addition, these pupils do not use this 'new language', MSA, in their everyday life outside the school milieu, a fact that adds to the complication of the situation.

### 4. Methodology

This part of the research will present the research design, the research tools and the sample population involved in this study. The findings will also be presented.

#### a. Research Design and research tools

The present study has been conducted at two different primary schools situated in Tlemcen, a town of the north West of Algeria., and in order to provide this study with trustworthiness, the researcher opted for the so called 'classroom observation'. One of the greatest advantages of this method is that participant observation enables the researcher to reveal factors significant for a thorough comprehension of the research problem, but that was obscure when the study was

designed. Therefore, what is determined from participant observation can aid in a perfect understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Hence, in my investigation, the observation has included the attendance of four sequenced sessions in each primary school and has focused on exploring the variety of Arabic used by teachers and learners as two partner parties in classroom interaction, in addition to the pupils' language difficulties in classroom interaction.

In a good atmosphere, the researcher sat at the back so as not to disturb the pupils and paid attention to everything that occurred in each session taking into account the learners' degree of motivation, their interaction and their language difficulties. I also wrote down observations in a form of notes, a fact which has allowed me further to notice what has been accomplished by teachers and pupils.

### **b. Participants**

The selection of a proper sample is fundamental to a sample survey. The sample population should also explain the group of persons under investigation. Thus, the profile of the subjects should be provided so that the reader gains knowledge about the different variables resulting from gender, age, race, geographical places, religious beliefs, educational background, etc. As the aim of this study is to investigate the effect of diglossia on education, the sample population has been selected randomly from two primary schools as a sample of the research community. It includes 36 pupils (18 pupils from each primary school) and 6 teachers (three teachers from each selected primary school). No special criteria in terms of race, sex and age range were applied.

## **5. Presentation of the Findings**

Four sequential observation sessions were organized in each primary school. They were held in distinct grades, and the data were gathered from various classes in a direct and natural manner. Consider the following instances:

- *Example 1:* First grade pupils (Abdulhamid Bnu Badis PS- Tlemcen)

The conversation below occurred between the teacher and pupils in which she asked them to show her their homework before starting the lesson.

- Teacher: sbaḥ lḫi:r ja atfa:l dǧrtu ḡamalkum lju:m

(Good morning children, have you done your homework?)

- Pupils: naɣam

(Yes.)

- Teacher: əffəθhu lkajja:t... ʔasəmə ha:da:ʔ[labtkum baʃ təkəkətbu ɣarf /ʃ/ meʃi ɣarf /s/

(Open your copybooks; what is that? I asked you to write the letter [ʃ] not [s].)

- Teacher: ʔija win rah ɣamaləʔk ja oussama rak kasu:l lju:m

(Oussama, where is your homework, today you are lazy.)

- Pupil: əhəbna nəhawsu fi lʔabali

(We went to the mountain.)

- Teacher: manquluʃ hakaða nqulu ila lɣa:bati mafhu:m

(We do not say it this way, we say to the forest, is it clear?)

Teacher: lju:m ɣandna ɣarf ʔa:ɣar kəmmɪna mɣa ɣarf [ʃ] wə [ʃ]

(Today, we are going to deal with another letter; we have finished with [ʃ] and [ʃ].)

*-Example2:* Second grade pupils (Ibn Msaib PS- Tlemcen)

Consider the following conversation between the teacher and pupils in a lesson of reading comprehension. The teacher stuck up a picture on the blackboard and asked the pupils to describe what they see in this picture. The topic discussed was 'In the shopping mall'.

- Teacher: ma:ða: tula:hiðu:n jusra ija ɣabbri

(What do you notice? Yusra comment!)

- Pupil1 : muna waʔadat ʃuratan lissana:fi:ri fi ɣulbatin mina lʔubni

(Mouna found Smurphs' picture in the cheese box.)

- Pupil2: muna mɣa ummiha fi lɣa:nu:ti

(Mouna is with her mother in a shop.)

- Teacher: manquluʃ lɣanut walakin əlmatʔar

(We do not say shop but the shopping mall.)

- Teacher: wa maða tarawna ajdan

(What do you also see?)

- Pupil3: muna maɣa ummiha taʃtari kifəʃ nqulu swalaħ da:r billuɣa

(Mouna is with her mother, how do we say house supplies in MSA?)

- Teacher: nqululhum lawazimu lbajti awi lmanzili ma hija muʃtaqqaq:t lhali:b

(We call them 'homr supplies'. What are the milk products?)

- Pupil1: lɟajurt wɟɟubn wəzzabda

(Yoghurt, cheese and butter.)

- Teacher: hadou kalimat nquluhum bəddariɟa maɟi bluɟat lqism

(We use these words in AA and not in MSA.)

-*Example3:* Third grade pupils (Abdulhamid Bnu Badis PS- Tlemcen)

Consider the following conversation in which the teacher asked the pupils to remind her about the story of 'the wind and the sun'.

Teacher: manal ərwahi llehna wahkina lqiɟa nte? əssəmf wərrih

(Manal, come here and tell us the story about the sun and the wind.)

Pupil1: əssəmf kanət tətəlləm mfa rrih wma qaddətf təɟləb ərrih

(The sun talked to the wind and it was unable to fight it.)

Teacher: lima:ða: (Why?)

Pupil2: li?anna ssəmf ɟaɟtat linnasi ɟassaɟa:nata wa rrih aɟtathum lberd

(Because the sun gave heat to people and the wind gave them cold.)

Teacher: baɟ tamtaz əɟɟams wa bima:ða: tamtaz ərrih

(What characterizes the sun and what characterizes the wind?)

Pupil3: əsemf hija lhudu? wərrih lquwa

(The sun symbolizes silence and the wind is symbol of force.)

Teacher: ahsant ja muhammed əɟaɟ lماكنək bəssaɟ la:zəm tɟul əɟɟams wa laɟsa əssemf (Very good Mohammed, return to your place.)

## 6. Discussion

The striking result obtained from classroom observation is the teachers' speech which is a mixture of MSA and AA in the whole examples we provided. This in fact, confirms the teachers' claims concerning their teaching strategy which is based on the middle variety whose major aim is to facilitate comprehension.

Pupils from various grades had spent strenuous efforts to communicate in MSA accurately, but most of them showed a kind of frustration and feeling of linguistic insecurity when answering



their teachers. This is mainly due to their weak exposure towards the variety which is supposed to be used as the medium of instruction, that is, MSA, in addition to their inability to find the correct words and expressions in order to fill their lexical gaps.

When the pupils were asked to construct accurate sentences from the list of words provided to them, there seemed to be a misunderstanding of these particular words, sometimes pupils used other words, a fact which changes the whole meaning of the sentences and this is considered as a handicap in the learning process. Moreover, when the pupils were asked to remind the teacher about the story of 'the sun and the wind', it was quite difficult for them to summarize the whole story using exclusively MSA. Some phonological mistakes have also been noticed, indeed, when the pupil, in example 3, said /əssəməʃ/ instead of /əʃʃams/, the teacher corrected the mistake which has also been made by the teacher himself. This is mainly due to the teacher's use of the dialect inside the classroom.

The sociolinguistic phenomenon of diglossia is, therefore, highly noticeable in the whole classes. There seems to be confusion about what constitutes Standard Arabic and what does not. Furthermore, as affirmed in the results, the linguistic distance between the vernacular and MSA affects principally vocabulary and phonology. These educational problems are directly connected with the diglossic nature of the Arabic language.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

The diglossic nature of today's Arabic seems to be an inevitable issue as it stymies the academic progress. In truth, the linguistic duality problem that diglossia presents, is a definite bothersome aspect having a direct impact on the young learners' language achievement. There are many determinants which make this sociolinguistic phenomenon highly problematic such as the linguistic context in which pupils live whether at home since children do not grow up speaking MSA, or in school which is almost perceived as a 'new world', for children have to contend with an 'unfamiliar' language. Besides, teachers explain the lessons using the vernacular despite their awareness of MSA as the sole and unique variety implemented as a medium of instruction. It is true that the new variety, ESA, has emerged (Mahmoud, 1986).

Thus, on the basis of our findings in the present study, it will be beneficial if all the teachers give up using the vernacular when presenting their lessons and place more emphasis on the standard

variety, MSA, as a medium of instruction. Increasing positive pupils' attitudes towards MSA and constantly encouraging them to be much closer to this variety in classroom interaction is also highly recommended. Furthermore, parents' awareness about the drawbacks of limiting their children's exposure to MSA during early childhood should be raised. Finally, another piece of research could be to see the extent to which the results and conclusions of the present paper can be generalised to other teachers and pupils in other regions of the country.

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