

*Some Observations on Language Use and Culture in
Algeria*

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We shall illustrate in this paper how language interacts with culture and the social environment in an Algerian urban context. We shall concentrate on the lexical level for a start. On the basis of casual speech performance in an Algerian urban context, some generalizations are made on the use of Algerian Spoken Arabic.

Conversation at the inter-individual level carries a substantial load of information on the speakers' social and cultural background. We can observe, for instance, how one variety or another is used when the geographical space allows it. For the linguist, this helps to locate the area the speaker comes from, his social class, his competence and language attitude(s), his level of education, his interests, and the like. In fact, the speaker's verbal behavior unveils his social attributions. Linguistically, this simply means that speech communities are, in essence, heterogeneous. Regional differences are "hidden" under the politically motivated use of the term "Language". Language variation is subject to changes in time and space. The most obvious factors that trigger off change are the social environment

(also referred to as “ecological structure”), population movements, dialect contact and eco-linguistic change. These affect language shift or change, lexical loss, the emergence of new forms... At the same time, some old forms may resist to change. These are commonly known as “cases of classicism”¹.

In the case of Algeria, any talk on language variation becomes taboo as soon as this issue is raised. The linguist’s say on this matter was virtually nil until recently where social upheavals and political changes lead to a more objective view on the language issue in Algeria. Thus, when the ordinary man in the street is asked the question how many languages are there in Algeria, he often says that there is “Arabic”², French, and Berber. He usually adds: “but the language of the country is “Classical Arabic”. The idea of Classical Arabic as the National Language of the country existed well before the establishment of the Algerian Constitutions which present the country as a homogeneous entity enveloped

¹. For Algerian Arabic, examples like ‘al qorʔa:n’ ‘the Koran’, ‘qafta:n’ ‘kaftan’ (traditional female dress), as well as the word ‘qasaman’ (the National anthem) are often cited as cases of classicism.

². Since our concern here is more on the dynamics of language rather than the effects of social settings on language use (pragmatics), we shall use the blanket term “Arabic” to refer to the varieties of Arabic known as Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Literary Arabic, Educated Spoken Arabic, etc.

in a single national language “Classical Arabic” which is thus given official status. In the Pre-independence era, the idea of a unity in language and culture was sustained by the upsurge of one people standing against the colonial ruler. After Independence (60’s and 70’s) many policies have been launched and implemented which integrated Algeria into the Pan Arabic movement (Panarabism), aiming at the reinforcement of the feeling of one country one language. The language situation in Algeria was and still is presented (by advocates of one language, one rule) under the banner of a Common Language (Classical Arabic) as if every Algerian spoke exactly the same way with a single homogeneous language. Obviously, this far-fetched conception of language in Algeria could not last long. Time and space (or the dynamics of language use) have proved this not to be the case and that Arabic as any other living language is prone to change and evolution. Some diversion is required here to clarify this point.

Various contemporary theories about the development of Arabic³ are available today. Most, if not all, have been put forward by non-Arab scholars. Rabin (1955), Ferguson (1959), Cohen (1962), Corriente

³. We do not include here the writings on the development of Arabic prior to the onset of Islam as expounded in the various theories put forward by the Arab grammarians among others.

(1976), Zwettler (1978), Ziadeh (1986) and Cadora (1992) among others, have studied this question. They all seem to converge as to how the language spread out from the Arabian Peninsula and how it became the dominant language in the Middle East and North Africa. Divergences appear, however, when it comes to the question of the origin of Modern Arabic Dialects. Basically, did they develop out of a unified form of Arabic (known as the Poetic Form) that established itself as the dominant language after the spread of Islam? Or did they develop out of local dialects that came into contact with the dominant language and have been very much influenced by it. Moreover, did these dialects develop as a result of the inability of the local populations to learn and acquire a “common poetic language” presumably used by the Arab settlers and herders, or did the local populations acquire “varieties of Arabic” brought along with the Arab armies and settlers themselves. In fact, the question raised in this vein is on whether the break between spoken Arabic and written Arabic occurred before or after the spread of Islam from the Arabic Peninsula to the Middle East and North Africa? Put otherwise, the question is whether the inherent linguistic variability in the use of Arabic a recent phenomenon resulting from the presence of different community types in the Arab World or has it always existed, as Cadora (1992) suggests?

In the case of Algeria, examples of strongholds (e.g., the Znata and the Sanhadja tribes) prevented full contact with the Arab armies. This has left social and linguistic traits of such reluctance nowadays which are expressed in language attitudes and stances.

Elsewhere, Arabic was spoken by large numbers of non-native speakers who outnumbered the Arab settlers, thus producing a drastic change in the spoken form of Arabic which drifted away from the poetic language known as “Al ‘arabiyya” (العربية) “Arabic”. This written form of Arabic which has always been characterized by an “over-protectionism” over the centuries, is “locked in” as the language of the Koran, and maintained as a linguistic ideal. It has never been given a chance to develop. On the other hand, the dialects of Arabic developed at their own pace, thus giving rise to a process of “dialect atomization” which derives from illiteracy rates and the decline in literary production of 18th and 19th centuries⁴. The post independence era, which witnessed a substantial literacy rise in the Arab world, has opened doors to the emergence of levels of contemporary Arabic such as

⁴. Exception is made of the Nahda Movement during which literary works in Arabic were produced. These works were accessible to the few Arab literate readers and to the West because the illiteracy rate in the Arab World was so high that the top-to-bottom linguistic impact did not bring about the expected language development and use. Added to this, folk production and popular culture were not accepted to say the least and the bottom-to-top influence did not actually take place.

Literary Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Educated Spoken Arabic, etc.⁵

This leads us on to the question of how language and culture operate in Algeria. The preliminary observations at the lexical level that we present here, will serve as a starting point for further research at other linguistic levels.

The study of the corpora gathered this far shows how actual language use reflects the dynamics of social change. The observation of speech performance in an Algerian urban context⁶ gives some interesting insights as to nature of the cultural background of the speaker. It also reveals the social group he wants to identify himself to. The speaker's verbal behavior highlights his Bedouin, rural or urban(ized) background. It also brings to light his social attributions and the general pattern of transition that underlies the passage from rural to urban, to rural again in some cases.

Cadora's (1992) theory of eco-linguistics discusses, among other things, the cultural history of the

⁵ . For detailed studies on this question, see Blanc (1960) Badawi (1973) El Hassan (1977) Beeston (1970), Meiseles (1980), etc.

⁶ . The urban context is selected as it is very indicative of changes and social attributions by virtue of its being open to change as opposed to a rural context where the load of traditions hinders social and linguistic changes.

Arab World. A close relationship is established between change in ecological structure and linguistic change. On the basis of the structures “Bedouin”, “rural” and “urban” attested in the Middle East, there is a tendency to move from Bedouin to rural and from rural to urban. This shift in ecological structure is caused by factors such as “search for water sources”, draught, natural disasters etc. that bring about noticeable changes in language use within a relatively short period of time. Applied to the Algerian situation, the drastic change in ecological structure (or social environment) of the past two decades has triggered off changes the use of one word form or another. This is mainly due to population movements, unemployment, the search for a better life, upward mobility, and last but not least the sudden flee from rural areas towards urban centers that provide shelter for peace and security. The impact of these changes on language and culture in Algeria and the speed at which they occurred makes it even harder to pursue or sustain any language maintenance program. What we get is a superimposed linguistic repertoire which is restricted to official settings (Learned Arabic) and a dialectal component representing locally-situated vernaculars that undergo a consistent process of change at all linguistic levels. An illustration of these changes is given in the table below:

Table I

Dialectal Forms	Classification	Standard Form(s)
məgru:n/məlh fa/hæ :jək/zəlla:ba/ hɪzæ:b	Rural / Urban / Rural	hɪzæ:b/ milhaf
fəsɟæ:n / ofɟsi / dɔɑ:bɑɟ/ buli:si / ʃurɟe	Borrowing	dɔɑ :beɟ
ɟɑwɑ / ɡæmila / kasru:na	Regional / Borrowing	kaft
sæhfa / guffa / paŋi / fi :li / bursa	Regional / Borrowing	salla / quffa
bni:ta / bnijja / bent / ʃi:ra	Regional / Shift	bint
frunka / dwa:ra / swarda / drahəm / habbæ:t	Borrowing/ Rur./ Urb.	naqd,nuqu:d / ma:l
tərræ:s / razəl	Rural / Urban	razul
bɑjjɑɟ / bəntər / sbay	Rural / Urban	ɟɑɑʔa/ ʒɑbɑɟɑ
χdɑ / tzəwwəʒ	Rural / Urban	tazawwazɑ
adidas (Addidas) / naik (Nike) / grifa	Urban	liba:s / hiðɑʔ

Table1 displays lexical forms that reflect changes in the social environment. Although the conversational codes from which these items are taken may be assigned to “unmarked codes” under the form of casual speech that do not necessarily signal the speaker’s group membership or social meaning, the patterns above indicate changes from rural (R) to urban (U) as in:

məgru:n → məlħfa ~ ksa → ħæ:jək « a veil » →
ʒəlla:ba → ħizæ:b

Incidentally, [məlħfa] (sometimes [ksa]) is the closest term to the source language word [milħæf] which means « a blanket » or « a cloak ». The term [ħizæ:b] was introduced in the early 80's while [ʒəlla:ba] which previously denoted a male cloth (R) refers nowadays more to a female cloth (U) than a male's one, probably under the influence of neighboring Morocco where many women and girls wear this dress in the city. However, the "ħizæ:b" (R & U) which was a dominant feature in most Algerian urban centers and universities seems to progressively give room to a more western type of dress among young girls and female students. It still occupies a dominant place in the way older women dress in town. This shows how change in the social environment affects the lexical change. It also reveals the change process from Bedouin, to rural, to urban, to rural again, that Cadora (1992) refers to in his study of eco-structure and eco-linguistics in the Arab World. Similarly, the lexical change for « officer »,

fəsjæ:n → ofisji → dɑ:bɑt → buli:si → ʃurtə

is a mirror of change in eco-structure. The variation bulisijja ~ buli:sa for a policewoman emerged when policewomen appeared in urban centers. Their sudden withdrawal from the city after 1991, led to a temporary drop of the terms « bulisijja », « buli:sa ». Nowadays, policewomen re-appear in the city, mainly downtown. Surprisingly enough, the corpora indicate that neither « bulisijja » nor « buli:sa » are productive. Rather, the term « ʃortɛjja » is more likely to be used. This term derives from the masculine word /ʃurti/ of Arabic to which the feminine marker {ja} has been added to give [ʃortɛjja], a word with presumably no cognate in the Arabic language, as this occupation is not usually attested for women in the Arab World. Although systematic correlation cannot be made at this stage, it appears that the process of change from a dialectal form borrowed from the French word [poli:s / polisje] to a standard form [ʃurti] lead to a new form; namely « ʃortɛjja » which reflects language, culture and society in action.

Another interesting case in Table 1 is the change for the word for « basket »,

sæħfa → guffa → paŋi → fi:li → bursa

The form « guffa » is the closest to the Arabic word « quffatun ». This form has not only changed in terms of ecostructure from Bedouin to Rural to Urban, but it has

also changed in terms of its symbolic and social values. A few years ago, the social meaning of «guffa» was intimately linked to a limited or very low income. Carrying a «guffa» was symbolic of poverty, sub-standard living, and a big if not a huge family behind. More recently, with the open market policy and the decline of the national currency, the «guffa» has been gradually substituted by «paŋi» «a small basket», then «fili» «a small bag made of thread» to end up as «bursa» «a small plastic bag». The «guffa» which used to reflect rurality and poverty to the point of denoting «simple mindedness» outside the market environment, has re-emerged today as a symbol of wealth and high social ranking. Near the market, the «guffa» is taken out of the car's boot and filled with «niceties» that the ordinary buyer in the market cannot afford. The lexical variation and change for «money», illustrated by the forms,

frunka / dwa:ra / swarda / drahəm /dina:r / ħabbæ:t

also reflects a similar underlying process of social changes and cultural attitudes expressed through speech. As a French borrowing, the form “frunka” was probably used in both rural and urban areas. Whether this form was attested in Bedouin speech or not is a matter for study. The fact remains that the Bedouin trade system is usually based on exchange in kind or barter. What is

interesting to notice here is the shift from “frunka” to “dina:r” (the National currency) to “habbæ:t” which represents the original plural form of “habba” “a unit”, as in “χams ḥabbæ:t tæffæ:ḥ” (five apples). This atomization of income through the term “ḥabbæ:t” is indicative of the continuous fall in the buying power of the majority of Algerians to the point where money is counted in units to differentiate the rich from the poor. Having “ḥabbæ:t” is connotative of new wealth establishment and power.

The last illustration of the process of linguistic change as subject to social change is taken from the forms for clothes, as in:

adidas (Adidas) / naik (*Nike*) / grifa

which characterize an urban use attested particularly in the speech of the young boys, though some girls may use it to sound « boyish ». It is clear that no Arabic equivalent can be given to these forms as they represent trade-marks ([adidas], [naik] for the first two and a borrowing from the French « griffe » meaning a « well known trade mark ». Culturally, the use of such forms denotes a tendency to identify oneself to modernity or to the western life style. Yet, the eco-structure or social environment conflicts with this notion of modernity at various levels. A point in case is to see carts and cars sharing the same space at times in our peripheral motorways.

We do not claim to make systematic correlation between linguistic change and social meanings out of these preliminary observations. Rather, we prefer to situate them within a global debate on the issue of language, culture and identity in Algeria today. Our feeling is that research has to be conducted in this vein for a better understanding of the culturally and linguistically complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of the Algerian society as exemplified in its urban centers. These observations also bring to the fore aspects of the actual speech performance of the Algerian speaker which are generally set aside or neglected in much of the linguistic work conducted in this area. Based essentially on preconceived notions and models that are imposed upon the observed reality, such work results in the application of social-indexical systems that do not necessarily match the observed social and linguistic phenomena in an Algerian context. Nevertheless, the fact remains that as in other aspects of the study of the dynamics of language use, the linguist's models and categories may not necessarily match the speaker's own perception of reality.

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