

## **An Overview of the Linguistic Situation in Algeria**

**BOUHADIBA Farouk**  
(Université d'Oran)

### **Résumé**

Dans cet article, nous essayons de tirer un certain nombre de conclusions sur l'incompatibilité d'un modèle théorique du type structuraliste quant à la description de langues à morphologie de non concaténation telle que la langue Arabe. De là, un aperçu général est présenté concernant les tenants et les aboutissants des résultats de descriptions et d'analyses basées sur le modèle structuraliste et qui peuvent aboutir à des inadéquations avec la réalité du terrain telle qu'elle se présente à l'observation. Les remarques dans cet article sur la dynamique des usages langagiers nous mènent à faire appel à un concept nouveau que nous proposons et qui est celui de "Complexe de langue" qui, somme toute, représente le corpus de départ de toute description ou analyse proprement dite des usages langagiers en Algérie.

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is neither to draw a comparison nor give a historical account on the varieties of Arabic and the studies conducted in this vein. Rather, we merely ask the question whether structuralism, as a theoretical model, has allowed the linguist to describe the Arabic language adequately or whether it has imposed on this language a theoretical model that surely applies nicely to Indo-European languages but it sometimes fails to describe non-concatenative languages like Arabic. We may also ask if the linguist's attention and efforts to describe and analyse the dynamics of language as it is actually acquired, perceived, and produced by the native speaker has not shifted nowadays from 'field linguistics' of the fifties and sixties to 'armchair linguistics'<sup>1</sup> of the eighties. For this purpose, we shall look at some hypotheses on the Arabic

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<sup>1</sup> . A term coined in Ch. Ferguson (1994): Diglossia revisited.

spoken in Algeria and try to observe the dynamics of language use in an Algerian urban context in the first place.

### **1. Insights into some linguistic accounts on Algerian Spoken Arabic**

We shall not discuss the structural approach on Arabic. We just point out here that it has not fully accounted for the facts of Spoken Arabic. We shall illustrate with some examples taken from the structuralist works in this field, the most obvious idiosyncrasies in the description. Moreover, we do not claim that these studies were not beneficial. On the contrary, they have contributed a lot to the understanding of these varieties in due course and they still serve as valuable reference works for both the neophyte and the specialist in this field.

For illustration purposes, suffice here to mention three clear cases where the structural approach, based essentially on a binary conception of language, does not necessarily work for the description and analysis of Arabic. The first case concerns the description of vowels and consonants and the issue on pattern congruity. The second case deals with the treatment of emphatics in Arabic, and the last one exemplifies some infixation processes in Arabic that cannot be handled properly with a concatenating model under a structuralist vision of the facts of language.

Cantineau (1960 : 111) raises the question on the number of vowel phonemes in the varieties of spoken Arabic in Algeria, mainly the ‘short’ and ‘extra short’ ones (e.g. the schwa [ə]) that appear in consonant clusters or as a result of assimilation processes, be it progressive or regressive, where it was difficult for some linguists to decide to what short vowel phoneme of Arabic /i, u, a/ should the ‘short’ (brève) or ‘extra short’ (super brève) be attributed.

Similarly, the lowering to [e,o,ɔ] respectively in the environment of a true emphatic /t̤, q̤, ʒ/ led some linguists to posit five, sometimes more, vowel phonemes for a given variety where in fact these low

vowels represent mere surface realisations of the same vowel phoneme. Cantineau (1960: 111) makes the French dialectologists aware of this fact when he states:

*“dans les dialectes modernes de l’arabe, les timbres vocaliques semblent à première vue nombreux et variés; les dialectologues français (probablement sous l’influence de notre propre langue riche en timbres vocaliques) en distinguent un grand nombre.”*

A misleading description of the basic triangular vowel system of Arabic does only overcrowd the vowel system and it deviates from what the earlier Arab grammarians considered as movements rather than vowels. Although new distinctive units have probably emerged due to contact, shift, or change, and some drop outs have occurred, the fact remains, as Cohen (1965) puts it, that the basic three vowels of Arabic have such a large latitude of realisation that they can take shades of sounds without necessarily altering meaning.

The description of the consonants of Arabic Dialects has also been a source of difficulty and contradictory linguistic accounts. Some of the fallacies are linked with the tendency in descriptive linguistics to look for pattern congruity and thus present an almost perfect consonant phoneme inventory for a given variety. The typical controversy on the number of Emphatic consonants in Arabic is a case in point. Jakobson (1957) regards emphasis as a property of the segmental unit. He tries to apply the distinctive feature theory to emphasis by setting up the binary opposition “flat” (a narrowing of either end of the oral cavity) versus “plain” (absence of such a narrowing). Although his approach has reduced the number of emphatic/non emphatic pairs to eight, as opposed to Trubetzkoy’s (1939) set of ten, a number already challenged in Cantineau (1946), he nevertheless supports Trubetzkoy’s treatment of the uvular stop /q/ as an emphatic, contra Cantineau (1946). Cantineau’s reaction came immediately

*“... c’est une erreur: le /q/ a bien un autre point d’articulation vélaire et même uvulaire... mais il n’en a pas d’autre, il est vélaire et non vélarisé, il lui manque pour cela un autre point d’articulation principal plus en avant, par rapport auquel l’articulation vélaire jouerait un rôle de ‘travail accessoire’. (1960, p. 182).*

Ferguson’s<sup>2</sup> article on the emphatic l in Arabic is also a case where he makes it clear that /l/, as /r/ for that matter, is a pseudo-emphatic as it loses its ‘emphatic features’ in some environments, unlike the true emphatics which keep their emphatic features in all environments.

On the morpho-syntactic level, a structural approach typically uses concatenating strings such as: {the + boy + s → the boys}. Such a string works well for most Indo-European languages which are mainly characterised by prefixation and suffixation processes. Arabic, and many other languages (Turkish, Japanese, etc.) uses infixation processes that can hardly be handled by a concatenating model. For example, the reflexive form of /ʃaka/ ‘to complain’ is rendered /iʃtaka/ ‘to complain to s.o.’ via the infixation of the reflexive morpheme {t}. A concatenating model would give something like /i + ʃ + t + aka / which clearly violates the integrity of the weak root <ʃkw> of Arabic. Mention should be made here that an auto-segmental approach handles somehow better such an infixation and reflects, at the same time, the derivational nature of Arabic morphological processes. From the sociolinguistic standpoint, similar shortcomings in the structural descriptions are noted. The general tendency is to “compartmentalize” the process of communication under a binary

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2 . Ch. Ferguson (1956: 446-52), ‘The Emphatic l in Arabic’, in *Language*, vol. 32, number. 3, Harvard University.

approach that forces itself on the linguistic reality. We are all familiar with concepts like Diglossia where pairs like Classical Arabic vs. Dialect varieties are established. We have also read on Bilingualism where contrasts like Arabic-French, Arabic-Berber; Berber-French, to name but a few, are discussed. Such an approach inevitably leads to the assumption that the facts of language and communication are described as if the speaker (in our case the Algerian native speaker) could choose between independent, fixed and delimited codes made available to him for his social interaction and over which he has command. This may in fact be true for individual types of bilingualism or plurilingualism. It may not necessarily hold true for collective or social bilingualism. Moreover, the observation of the native speaker's language behaviour clearly shows that he does not master any of these codes and that he is sometimes bemused by the complexity of the codes that he uses unconsciously, and over which he does not have a full command. The school failure is very revealing in this respect.

## **2. The Linguistic Situation in Algeria Today**

Today's linguistic situation in Algeria is characterized by a continuum of Arabic with local vernaculars where it is sometimes difficult to decide where one starts and where the other ends. The linguistic spectrum is characterized by a mixture of language varieties with resemblance and similarities of various kinds. The typical forms attested elsewhere<sup>3</sup> are less problematic. These are Classical Arabic, Literary Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Educated Spoken Arabic, and the most common of Modern Arabic Dialects. The dialects are typically characterized by a dose of Arabic but where French is clearly present at the lexical level with some traces of Spanish in the dialects spoken in the north western part of Algeria and perhaps traces of Maltese or Italian in the central and north eastern coast of Algeria.

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<sup>3</sup>. See Badawi, M. (1973) *Mustawaja:t al 'arabijja al mu'a:sera fi Misr*. Cairo.

With the upward mobility that characterises Algeria today in its becoming an affluent society, a fusion of the varieties in contact within a continuum, together with the search for Pan-arabism (cf. the concept “à la mode” of *al 9awraba*, used recently by The President of Algeria) have given rise to a new form of Arabic, commonly referred to as "al lugha al wusta" or “Intermediate / Intermediary) Arabic. The continuum also includes the source language Arabic, Berber or one of its regional varieties - Tamazight, Chaoui, Chleu, Tergui, Mzabi, etc. - which play also an important role linguistically and culturally as they are clearly present in the linguistic map of Algeria. Finally, we have French which takes the status of a “major language” in Ferguson’s<sup>4</sup> terminology but which is tolerated politically and has just recently had a new competitor: English. Consequently, some cases of individual bilingualism / pluri-lingualism, or less frequently collective bilingualism may be found in micro social groups with French-Arabic, French-Berber and Arabic-Berber in particular. The linguistic map of Algeria wouldn’t be complete if the remains of Turkish and Spanish and a penetration of English at an ever increasing pace were not mentioned.

The facts show that the language situation in Algeria which is characterised by a high degree in variation and by the use of three languages in contact (Arabic / French / Berber) rests upon a more complex dynamics made up of intersections, mixing, doses of one language or another, and switching which constitute the very nature of today’s language situation in Algeria in all its complexity and paradox. This is what the linguist is faced with when he embarks on a descriptive and analytical study of languages used in Algeria. It is precisely this spontaneous situation of expression and communication that must be described and analysed for a better exploration and understanding of the “*communicative competence of the Algerian speaker*”. The question raises next as to what

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<sup>4</sup> . Ch. Ferguson (1986 : 311), National Sociolinguistic Profile Formulas, Bright, W. ed., Sociolinguistics. The Hague, Mouton.

model serves best the description of a case where more than one system are triggered off at the same time. Although the systems reflect genetically different languages (Arabic / French), communication takes place between speaker and hearer. We believe that such a case raises a number of issues as to the limits of today's linguistic inquiry, based essentially on the analysis the native competence essentially made up of one single language and it therefore may fail to account for cases of bilingualism or plurilingualism such as these.

### **3. Language Use in Algeria**

A number of studies exist nowadays which refer to a plurilingualism in the Algerian context where the co-habitation and use of at least three languages (Arabic / French / Berber) is maintained and put to work according to a number of socio-economic and political factors. The domains of use of each of these languages – or its varieties - is generally consciously or unconsciously recognised by the majority of users (e.g. Arabic in the Administration, French for Communication, Science and Technology, the varieties of Arabic, French or Berber at home and for informal purposes). In this case, the choice of one form or another by the speaker is generally dictated by social constraints which exert a pressure on his communicative strategy and competence.

What's often missing in the description is summarized in Martinet's (1981: 12) words:

*“ Ce qu'on doit attendre du linguiste, ce n'est pas qu'il nous décrive les expériences des sujets parlants, mais bien la façon dont elles vont s'articuler en fonction de la structure et des ressources de la langue employée lorsqu'on désirera en faire part à autrui [...]. Ce ne peut être que par l'observation d'une langue comme instrument de communication qu'il [le linguiste] pourra dégager tout ce qui la distingue des autres formes du langage humain.”*

In fact, Cantineau stresses the importance of observing, studying and analysing the daily linguistic tool of the speaker. This means of communication and social interaction that we shall refer to here as “Complexe de langue” in an Algerian context, determines not only the dynamics of language use in Algeria but also the ‘forces propres’ or cultural identity of the speaker. This means of communication composed of a complex mixture of codes with borrowing at all levels, calques, interferences, mixing, neologisms and code-switching where two or more languages (Arabic / French / Berber) are involved at the same time, is indicative not only of the language attitude of the speaker in a context which is free of social constraints but also his experience transmitted through a dynamic process triggered off by sets of systems and sub-systems pertaining to the languages that are not necessarily similar genetically. This is in fact the situation where the linguistic genius of the Algerian speaker is at work, i.e., in genuine communication activities where he is most productive. This represents the ‘Complexe de langue’ where different linguistic systems are triggered off while information is being transmitted in an Algerian context. This amalgam of features derived from the co-habiting languages (Arabic/ French / Berber) with varying doses represents in fact the “language resources” that the speaker has in order to communicate. The linguist’s task is then to examine this complex in its dynamic synchronicity.

A number of scholars interested in issues on bilingualism have pointed the finger towards this avenue of exploration related to the dynamics that underlies bilingualism and they have pointed out that the study of these processes was quite indicative of the speaker’s strategies of communication and his language attitudes behind language use. Switching in terms of the Matrix Code and the Embedded code is scrutinized and the ‘strength’ or ‘productivity’ of one language over the other is the determining factor for the Matrix code. By and large, a socially major language would automatically stand as the Matrix code while the ‘minor’ language or languages become the embedded codes. Cases of the Algerian Immigrants in



France are representative of French as the Matrix code whereas Algerian Arabic stands as the Embedded code. The situation in Algeria would inverse roles. Other case studies include Moroccan / Dutch code switching in the Netherlands. Myers-Scotton, Carol (1993) did a pioneering job in this vein, stressing on the fact that the Matrix code is dictated somehow by the “force” it has in a society.

In our case, the languages in contact are in a socially complex and rapidly changing linguistic situation where the use of one language or the other often determines social inequalities not only in numbers (more or less important social groups) but also inequalities in relation to decision making and economic strength (cf. new concepts like “sharika gadra”, “rkiza” “tag 9la men tag’ ‘ghallad attazdam’ etc.) that the State seems to ignore or set aside this linguistic plurality which is in itself a considerable language wealth as it is very productive and creative. Given these considerations, it seems difficult to rely solely on the social status of the language to determine the Matrix and the Embedded codes.

The situation where the speaker finds himself dictates in a way the nature of the Matrix code as opposed to the Embedded code. This can only be observed through the dynamics of language use in an Algerian context that we shall try to illustrate.

Let’s take for example a sample of a talk that we recorded at university, in the department of English (Es-Sénia, Oran). The talk is free of any social constraint and the speakers were not aware that they were being recorded.

Speaker A: [gælli (he told me) bəlli (that)# fo pa l fæ:r (no need to do it) xalli (leave) hætta l (until) yadwa (tomorrow) # nša lləh (with God’s will)## se pa la pɛ:n (forget about it) # lju:m (today)# parskə (because)# 9ændəh (he has) # šuʔl (something to do) ## ʒəkrwa (I think) ##]

Speaker B: [dõk (so) ty a ltã (you've got time), nroño (we shall go) win (where) gulna (we decided), yε:k (≈ wont'we?)]

(The word for word translation between brackets serves as a support to the comprehension of the speech above).

This is rendered as:

A. "He told me not to do it (present it ???). Leave it for tomorrow (Lit.) with God's Will. It's not worth doing it (presenting it ???) today because he's got something to do, I think."

B. Then, (So) you've got time. We shall go as planned, won't we?

We believe it is quite difficult to classify such a discourse as part of a continuum (of Arabic) or a typical case of code-switching, or even a hypothetical Arabic-French continuum. This sample of speech is characteristic of the "Complexe de langue" in an urban setting. No doubt, it represents an organised form of discourse in the sense that there exist a minimal agreement between the speaker and the hearer he/she addressing. The interesting point here is that one can observe, among other things, a speech with a rich vocalic repertoire (eg. [æ, ə, ɑ, ε] etc.), inter, intra and extra phrastic code-switches, borrowings from French like the verb [fε:r] with an Arabic resonance of the [r], a realisation [p] of the /p/ of French which is a source of difficulty for the native speaker of Arabic who often pronounces /p/ as [b] in French or in English. One can also spot a case of classicism / religious talk in (nša llõh) and consonant clusters (rsk, krw) that violate the syllable structure of Classical Arabic but which are produced without having recourse to epenthetic processes of vocalic insertions to break the cluster in question.

In terms of Matrix codes and Embedded codes, the setting (university) should put French or English in the Head position as

the Matrix code. The sample shows that this is not the case. The dialect occupies the Matrix position and French becomes the Embedded code.

Similar cases have been attested in different social settings where the dynamics of language use is more dictated by the speaker's intention and mood rather than the context itself.

The question remains as to where shall we situate such a speech performance, where does the matrix code start and at what level is the embedded code triggered off, what are the systems and sub-systems involved? Do they converge or do they diverge, are they a source of conflict and in what sense? In other words, are we in front of a classical case of code-switching, code-mixing where two or more linguistic systems are identified and localised with all the social constraints that code-switching pre-supposes? Or are we in front of a linguistic phenomenon of progressive fusion where the languages in contact form a continuum that stems out of a number of socio-economic factors which have given rise to such a complex linguistic situation?

Among these factors, suffice here to mention the rural exodus to urban poles, upward mobility of lower social classes, the socio-historical links of the languages in contact and of course the impact of the mass media and the hyperbola (Arab, French, Spanish TV programmes etc.) on the speaker's performance. The fact remains that the linguist must penetrate this language complex made of mixing, intersections, and varying doses to set up a linguistic system where various sub-systems are triggered off at the same time. We shall leave these questions open for further investigation.

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