

The Status of Tamazight in Algeria

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Résumé:

Depuis la promulgation de Tamazight en langue nationale en 2002, le statut de cette langue n'a pas connu n'a pas connu d'avancement notable sur le plan utilitaire. Si cet état peut parfois s'expliquer par les lacunes inhérentes à sa situation sociolinguistique, force est de reconnaître que dans les centres de prise de décision, peu d'efforts sont fait pour faire sortir tamazight du statut de « langues éparses » à celui d'une langue utile et utilisé. Il en ressort en fait que le statut de tamazight reste encore aujourd'hui aussi confus qu'avant la promulgation de cette langue en langue nationale.

Status planning refers to deliberate efforts to allocate the functions of languages within a speech community. This is achieved by intervening on the status of a particular language or variety. It is generally languages which are downgraded which undergo a change to become “official”, “national” or “regional”. Often, this involves elevating a language or dialect into a prestige variety. Various reasons can determine the need for such a process. Among these is the will of a minority speech community to identify with its own variety rather than with that of the majority; the latter being considered as a threat to the existence of the minority language and subsequently of the minority group which may melt within the prevailing majority. Such instances have been recurrent in the history of languages and the reasons for such a phenomenon are various and sometimes intertwined. In this sense, Sankoff writes:

“The imposition of a language of wider communication has occurred both as a result of conquest per se, and in the establishment of standard languages via institutions like universal elementary education, where local populations have been transformed into linguistic minorities in a broader

political unit. In the case of a local linguistic group that has been conquered or surrounded by a larger group, slow language shift may mean many generations of bilinguals, providing ample opportunity for substratum influence to become established in the language towards which the community is shifting.” (2001:641)

Several examples of status planning can be cited. For example the French language started being used officially in the 16th century under Villiers-cottêrets’s ordinance (1539) which stipulated that Latin should be replaced by French for ordinances and court judgments. French in Quebec gained an official status after the 1977 “Charte de la langue française”. Similarly, Catalan in Spain was granted full official recognition in the Catalan region after Franco’s death in 1975. In the same way, Arabic in the Arab countries, particularly in Algeria, has been made official in the Constitution and through a series of ordinances and decrees which regulated and “imposed” its use and teaching in the society after the independence of the country in 1962. Therefore, language and politics have always been closely related since the former is said to be the symbol of the identity, the difference and the unity of a people and a country. The case of Arabic is somehow puzzling in the sense that Standard Arabic (SA) is not proper to any Arabic speaking country; rather, all Arab countries consider it as their language. This explains concepts like the “Arab World” and the “Arab Nation” which does not seem very convincing since there are many historical, cultural, linguistic and sometimes physical differences between the peoples. It is generally the religious factor combined to the linguistic one which are put forward to justify the unity of Arabs. Yet, with the same characteristics, i.e., religious and linguistic, France and Belgium consider themselves as different nations, just like Spain and Argentina, the UK and the USA. In any case, the status of language is determined by two institutions: a social one and a governmental one.

The social institution may comprise the community of speakers, cultural associations, extra-governmental academies, etc. The role of such agencies is to promote and raise the prestige of a minor language through the encouragement of self-esteem within the speech community itself. With Tamazight, many associations, singers,

intellectuals and academies undertook this task after the independence of Algeria. This work on the community's psychological level changed the feeling of self-hatred into one of self-esteem. Following this phenomenon, a huge work on history, culture and revival was triggered. Yet, language is the one aspect that focalised most investigation efforts as it represents the most observable differentiating characteristic between Arabic speakers and Tamazight ones. One must say that there is no distinction between the two linguistic groups at the individual level be it physical, cultural or statutory. Yet, on the collective level, a distinction has always been made – since independence - between Amazigh speakers and more precisely Kabyle speakers and Arabic ones in the sense that the Algerian language policy has always privileged Arabic to the detriment of Tamazight.

Various conflicts, riots, strikes, but also intellectual and political efforts resulted in the recognition of Tamazight as a “national language” in Algeria in 2002. Nonetheless, it has never been clearly explained what such a status meant and what its implications were. From a political point of view, this might mean that the language is genuinely Algerian, concerns all the country and belongs to all Algerians. Seen from this angle, one would rather say that no development is observed since this reality is a fact that has already been attested by anthropological, historical and cultural evidence. The other angle from which this question should be taken is that of the state's responsibility and implication. As the state is the institution which issues laws and regulations, it is to the state to accompany this change in status with a number of regulations which would guarantee the development, implementation and eventually the officialisation of the language at the long run. It would be unfair to deny that some institutions such as the HCA, the CNPLET and the creation of a Tamazight TV channel are to be welcomed as sign of good will. However, it is a fact that status planning which is more of the resort of the state is not really taken in charge by the government. One can cite the following facts to clarify this point.

- The inexistence of a state organism for Tamazight language management. Thus, all attempts at status management will be fruitless if there is no governmental intervention on corpus management. The huge and formidable work that is undertaken at

the extra-institutional level needs some kind of state institution to standardize and codify the language.

- The teaching of the language is limited to Tamazight speaking areas and within these areas to some schools and classes. The term “national” loses its semantic load since up to now the teaching of the language is confined to some regions. The question therefore is: are we in a context of a “national” language, a “regional” language or “regional” languages? Only clear state regulations can answer such a question
- The inexistence of any judicial laws which encourage the implementation and use of Tamazight. This is where the question of what is meant by “Tamazight is national language” is to be answered and made clear.

In fact, the status of a language depends much on a political will to promote the language. Although official speeches pretend to take in charge the reality of Tamazight, facts are here to prove that not that much is done in the field.

Because of the fact that Tamazight is not completely standardised, its status, or rather the status it should be given, is somehow delicate. Three options can be envisaged: official, national or regional.

During the events of the “Black Spring” in 2001, a platform of claims was issued by the Aarouch committee. One of the claims was to grant Tamazight the status of official language beside Arabic. This denotes the degree of language loyalty and language solidarity that exists within the Kabyle community. Bell (1983:169), following Fishman 1971, equates official language with nationism which he describes as the use of a language by a state to communicate with the people within the country and with its neighbouring countries. In addition, an official language is used in different fields such as education, finance, justice, etc. In fact; bell explains that nationism consists of:

“Power, rather than solidarity and integration at political, rather than sociocultural level”. (1983:169)

Amazighs’ claim presents, in our point of view, some problems which have to be solved. Tamazight not being standardised yet, it is in the impossibility of being used in fields like justice, economics, and the like that the problem resides. Because Tamazight has for long

centuries been confined to everyday intimate matters and had rarely been written until recently, it did not have the opportunity to develop the necessary terminology for learned and educated topics. Although a big work is being done to fill the gap, it is still at its beginning and one has to recognize that Tamazight, in its present state, cannot invest such fields as the ones just cited. The next problem is that Tamazight cannot be used for interchange with other countries, first because no other country uses the language as an official one for diplomatic and economic matters, and second because even the neighbouring countries have different forms of the language which are not mutually intelligible with the Algerian one(s). Thus, the big discrepancies that exist between Tamazight language varieties will have to be leveled before any attempt at officialising the language is undertaken. Of course, this does not mean that Tamazight cannot be official one day. But, to achieve this, there is need for one form of the language in Algeria. Only a unified form of the language can be able to fulfill the functions of an official language. This can be done through formal education and governmental management agencies which can work on the question at the long run. Only a governmental language policy which would be motivated by a strong will towards nationism can help the officialisation of Tamazight in Algeria.

The second possible status Tamazight can have, it actually has it, is that of a national language. The status of national language is equated by Bell (1983) with nationalism that he explains as follows:

“a ‘new’ nation is involved in a search for its own ‘ethnic identity’ as it attempts to overcome local, tribal, religious and other loyalties which clash with loyalty to the state”. Bell (1983:168-9)

The recognition of Tamazight as a national language fulfils the functions stated in the above quotation. Because of the downgraded status Tamazight has had since independence, conflicts and riots took place every now and then mainly in Kabylia. The state’s language policy made of Kabylia a rebellious region which has always shown rejection towards all governmental policies, especially those related to language and education. Under the pressure of the 2001 events, Tamazight has been granted the status of national language. The

implications of this new status on the politico-linguistic level are very interesting to observe even if briefly. The first notable implication is the shift from the sole Arabic belonging of Algeria to that of Arabic and Tamazight. The recognition of the Amazigh dimension at the official level has somewhat calmed the Amazigh, particularly the Kabyle, animosity towards the state. In addition, this has had the effect of softening the psychological distance that existed between Arabic speakers and Kabyle ones. This can be observed in the political parties' discourses. They all claim their Amazigh belonging and some of them even claim its officialisation. A noticeable change can also be observed within the society itself in that the Arabic dimension of Algeria is a little more accepted by Kabyle speakers and the Amazigh one is a little more accepted by Arabic speakers. Thus, the national status of Tamazight has reduced the linguistic and regional tensions that prevailed between Kabyle speakers and Arabic ones for many years. Another implication is the "very small" opening of the Algerian state on self autonomy at the ethnic, historical and linguistic level. The shift from a one Arabic nation and people with one culture and one history to the acceptance of a dimension different from Arabic is very remarkable as it denotes a change which has been dictated by the society and executed by the state. This step forward from a homogenous language and identity towards an identity that is varied and rich constitutes a big advance towards the recognition of an Algerian Algeria with all its variants and variations. Therefore, we can say that the nationalisation of Tamazight by the state has prevented deeper regional and linguistic clashes with the state and within the society itself. However, if this status seems to have been beneficial at the political level, it does not seem to be the case at the linguistic one. Firstly, the state does not specify which Tamazight variety is aimed at as a national language. As the Tamazight language – in the sense of one unified language – has no existence, the question is what is the "Tamazight" that the Algerian state considers as national? The fact that this question remains unanswered by the official discourse leaves the door open for all speculations and hypotheses. If what is meant by the Constitution is that Tamazight, with its different varieties, are national in the sense that they belong to all Algerians and that they have a real sociolinguistic existence, then there is nothing new since Tamazight is national de facto. What is left unclarified – willingly or not – is that if a dialect is to

be promoted to a language, a selection has to be undertaken. This selection has never been initiated by the state and; therefore, the national status of Tamazight remains vague. Even at the educational level, in each Tamazight speaking area, learners are taught their own local variety, wherefrom the following question: Is Tamazight a “national language” or a number of “regional languages”? The other element which is worth being noted is that the Tamazight language as it obtains at the official level is an abstraction which is recognised merely to avoid political and social tensions. The decision to consider Tamazight as a national language imposes on the state to bring the means to standardise and implement it. The only official intervention on the language is limited to teaching the language in some Tamazight speaking areas, a daily TV news bulletin presented each time in one of the five big Algerian Tamazight varieties i.e., Kabyle, Shawi, Targui, M’zabi and Chenoui and lately a TV channel in Tamazight where all the varieties are represented. What has just been mentioned is not to be taken as a plea against variation and the promotion of local varieties, but in a status planning perspective, variation is counterproductive as it prevents any attempt at standardisation. As to education, there seems to be a certain tendency to concentrate all the efforts on the Kabyle variety, probably because it is the variety in which most management work has been undertaken so far. This option seems sociolinguistically acceptable since the same process happens with most languages of the world. It is generally the variety of the capital city or that of the most prestigious speech community which is taken as a model. The option of opting for Kabyle as the basis of a national Tamazight language on which elements of the other varieties are to be grafted is not to be excluded. But, a problem of diglossia⁴⁵ will arise since there is a lack of mutual intelligibility between the different varieties. We can guess that in a generation or two most Tamazight speakers will learn this variety through education, but then, children will learn a variety which will be different from their mother tongue. This can have devastating effects on the children’s personality and their perception of their own language and culture. The case of Arabic is very edifying in this sense. Moreover, how can we imagine that a variety which is downgraded becomes major

⁴⁵ A diglossic situation already exists within Kabyle itself. The variety I called SST is understood only by those who have learnt it through education, while everyday life is dealt with in Low Kabyle.

to downgrade other varieties of the same status? From a democratic point of view, this would be irrational. This leads us to the third possibility.

As suggested by the workshop organised by the CRB on the Tamazight language management, it seems that it would be more productive to try to standardise each variety on its own. This will definitely give birth to at least four or five standard Tamazight varieties, which is too much. Yet, the final aim, which might take centuries to be reached, is to operate a gradual convergence between the different standard varieties to give birth to one variety. This point of view is inspired by the status of Catalan in Spain. Catalan comprises two main standards: a General Catalan Standard regulated by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (Institute of Catalan studies) which is based in Barcelona and Valencian Catalan regulated by the Acadèmia Valenciana de la Llengua (Valencian Language Academy). The two forms of the language take into consideration the regional linguistic specificities of each variety⁴⁶. These regional languages have the status of co-official languages besides Spanish within the autonomous region of Catalonia. Such a status, i.e., that of regional languages, will allow valorise the different Tamazight mother tongues and consequently valorise each Tamazight speech community. In the same trend, each variety can be managed and planned in an easier way by avoiding the “desocialisation” of the locutors since the work will be undertaken by native specialists themselves i.e., specialists who master the linguistic as well as the cultural aspect of the community in question. Were Romance languages not all varieties of Latin which developed to separate languages? The creation of regional academies or management institutions may contribute to the gradual convergence of the Tamazight varieties without playing the role of linguistic “imposers” since the convergence will take by itself through contact and exchange between the different academies and users of the different varieties.

⁴⁶ There is also a Balearic Islands standard based on General Catalan Standard but with phonetic, lexical and orthographic features of the spoken variety of the Balearic Islands

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