

Some Observations on Arabisation in Algeria

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There is no doubt that the decision to promote Classical Arabic (CA), as the official and national language of Algeria stems from the role it plays in ideally unifying the Algerian Peoples within a national geographical and religious space. Consequently, this politically motivated impetus finds itself strengthened with a policy of Arabisation. As a choice, this policy is not only politically convenient but it also bears the idea of sustaining a general the use of CA. As a strategy, it aims at the development and conquest of the most important domains of use, mainly science and technology. This objective can be realised only if CA is provided with the means of development including human and material resources. In addition, the objective cannot be limited to a quantitative success. There are other factors which relate to the advantages behind the use of a language; namely, the social, professional and self -actualisation gains, which in turn can lead the objective to satisfaction. This is where the problems of implementing the policy lay. In fact, the scientific and technological challenge rises to oppose the political one. This opposition is mainly due to the modernisation option Algeria has been pursuing and for which French was seen as the vehicle for technology.

Within the scale of development, Arabisation has played second fiddle to the politics of modernisation and

industrialisation. The strategies of development relied heavily on material investment and neglected to a large extent the investment in the human capital, which plays an important role in the preparation of the social environment to bring projects to realisation.

As an irreversible choice and in the absence of substantial solutions, the implementation happens in a climate of hesitation and mistrust. As an objective, Arabisation becomes seriously questioned and, so to speak, CA remains stagnant and passive to science and technology. There is then, no greater urgency than taking a concerted action to get hold of the situation before it goes any further. Arabisation should be conceived of as a social project so that CA will be oriented towards a social seeking dimension to influence positively the diglossic situation by reducing the gap between CA and the Arabic vernaculars on a bottom-top developmental scale.

Diglossia, i.e., the existence of two related varieties of a language, or as Meisles (1980: 120) puts it “A polar opposition between two related but distinct varieties of the same language” has evolved into triglossic and tetraglossic situations giving rise to one or more intermediate forms operating equidistantly from H and L.

Various labels have been used to identify these intermediate forms. In addition to CA and the Arabic vernaculars, linguists generally recognise Literary or Modern Standard Arabic (LA / MSA) which is written and used in contemporary books, newspapers or any other written document. They also identify Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA), an oral form resulting from the tendency of educated people to simplify their language use in formal and oral discourse. In spite of this state of affairs, CA does not go beyond the limits of lower spheres of use or the less strategic ones - a hierarchy of spheres resulting from the penetration of science and

technology into every aspect of life-. The will to promote CA and make plans for the conquest of strategic domains is but risky in a society which excludes the use of CA in scientifically and technologically most demanding ones. At the same time, it excludes an important portion of the population which remains illiterate and discarded from the realisation of any developmental project. Interaction with science and technology requires a widespread literacy which has a civilisational aspect and plays a decisive role in developing the ability to assimilate, use, adapt or create technology.

The promotion of CA relies inevitably on the involvement of the whole Algerian society. Language, as a man made and attitude based social phenomenon, remains dependent on the development of the human capital, which in turn causes the language to develop. Society is known to be in a constant change, and so language is in accordance with this continuous change. There is not the least doubt that Man is the source of social change through individual and mass influence. In fact, Man is a determining factor in the total stock of capital possessed by a society. It is then thoughtful to organise society so as to make maximum use of this capital and liberate its own means of investment and development. This is the only way out to direct positively the action of society on itself.

The observations we have come to this far on the issue of Arabisation in Algeria can be summarised as follows:

- Need to identify the language problem and recognise its contours so as to determine the main causes and suggest ways conducive to a solution.

Since Arabisation centres around CA and since its failure is somehow attributed to CA itself, the problems of CA should be analysed from two standpoints: the extrinsic and the

intrinsic factors, which seem to be the main source of language implementing failure.

On another front, one should deal with the historical background of the language. This includes three different areas: the colonial, pre and post independence eras focusing especially on the circumstances and the environment in which CA has evolved ever since 1830. An attempt should also be made to unfold the most prominent phases of the Arabisation policies conducted this far and which have been expected to translate into the promotion of C.A.

- Need to focus on the general mission of the educational system, its role when it comes to the realisation of the language objective, and its place within the social and economic environment.
- Need to deal with the phenomenon of the cohabitation of CA with the Arabic vernaculars on the one hand, and French on the other. The cost of each of the alternatives to CA should be considered, i.e., the mother tongue and French.
- Need to cover the intrinsic factors to which the failure of development of CA is attributed in order to build some reflections on the ways which may lead to the promotion and development of CA.

But before these needs are tackled, the definition of the term Classical Arabic should reach consensus. Stress must be put on the use of the term Classical Arabic, a term used here to mean the superimposed form which is written and used in books, newspapers, magazines and taught at school. It is also the variety to which various labels have been given on the basis of the different linguistic investigations which sought for a

methodological approach to describe it. Ferguson (1959), for instance, refers to it as a “high” variety while Monteil (1960) introduces the term “l’Arabe Moderne”. Meisles (1980:123) retains “Literary (or Standard Arabic)” implying the standard language, a variety that he distinguishes from the ancient language. Similarly Beeston (1970:15) uses the term “Standard Arabic” to identify the form which “... is in its main features modelled on the language of the Golden Age”. Marçais, W. (1930 : 401) [in Monteil,1960: 69] suggests the terms “ Ecrit ... ou Régulier, ou Littéral ou Classique ...”¹.

In fact, this form which has developed through time and space, is not isolated from the ancient language which is also known as Classical Arabic. But in addition to the religious domain for which CA is used and is referred to as the sacred language, CA has been used in other domains of life. In so doing, it has been subject to deviation from the sacred form or “Norm”. This renders it flexible, receptive and of some conductance in accordance with what it is used for. In other words, we do not necessarily see the contemporary use the term Classical Arabic to mean the “Sacred Language”. What is referred to as a sacred language is simply particular to a religious register.

¹ . La langue arabe se présente à nous sous deux aspects sensiblement différents : 1° une langue littéraire, dit arabe écrit ... ou régulier, ou littéraire, ou classique, qui seule a été partout et toujours écrite dans le passé, dans laquelle seule aujourd’hui encore sont rédigés les ouvrages littéraires ou scientifiques, les articles de presse, les actes judiciaires, les lettres privées, bref tout ce qui est écrit, mais exactement telle qu’elle se présente à nous n’a peut être jamais été parlée nulle part, et qui dans tous les cas ne se parle aujourd’hui nulle part ..., 2° des idiomes parlées, des patois ..., dont aucun n’a jamais été écrit ..., mais qui partout, et peut être depuis longtemps (sont) la seule langue de la conversation dans tous les milieux, populaires ou cultivés.

Finally, the practical aspect of these observations is primarily based on documented sources and personal research, while the theoretical aspect is inspired by Hitoshi's (1988) procedure for cause identification.

In his Quality Control Story, Hitoshi suggests a procedure for problem solving intended to identify the causes and their classification into major and minor causes. It is a procedure that allows sorting out the main cause. Generally, the stagnation of CA is traced back to different causes. In practice, however, these causes do not affect it to the same degree. Some of them affect it greatly while others, although considered important in theory, have very little effect when they are properly controlled.

In the course of our research, we have tried to identify the main cause, which we believe relates to the social factor and the means to manage the language. The focus on the social aspect of CA derives from the fact that the problem of CA is not principally a linguistic one but also a social one, a factor that has been so far overshadowed.

Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs inspires another underlying approach. According to Maslow [in Bollinger & Geert, 1987] upward social mobility depends on the social conditions within which the individual evolves and the extent to which he succeeds to satisfy his needs. If Man is provided with favourable conditions of development he will certainly, after satisfying easily his basic needs, attempt to satisfy other needs according to their hierarchical layout and seek higher social status. The roles the individual plays at the different levels of the hierarchy of needs will certainly involve and influence language. It should be interesting to see to what extent this argument holds for CA in Algeria today.

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