

Some Preliminary Observations on the implications of Bourdieu's Theory of Language Practice to Code Switching in the Berber minorities of Oran

BENHATTAB Abdelkader Lotfi
(Université d'Oran)

Introduction

The present paper is a tentative application of Bourdieu's theory of Symbolic power to the speech of Berber minority groups in Oran. This is done with a special reference to the Mzabi minority of this city. Bourdieu (1991) developed a whole theory in the interpretation of monolingual and bilingual linguistic behaviour. This theory is the one of 'language and symbolic power'¹ (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991). It is itself embedded into a broader theory of social practice (Bourdieu, 1977; 1991; 1993, 1998). His approach is interesting in the sense that besides integrating micro and macro social variables in the understanding of code switching, he puts symbolic power of speakers at the centre of his research procedures. Bourdieu (1977: 657) argues that speakers' actions are closely linked to the possible outcomes of these actions in linguistic markets², but before we go any further in the discussion of Bourdieu's

¹ Bourdieu (1991: 220) uses the concept of 'Power' as the possibility to gain access to powerful social positions thanks to the mastery of officially acknowledged varieties and thus to the successful participation in society at large. This consequently grants speakers some kind of symbolic capital of various kind (blommaert, 2005: 70)

² The concept of 'market' is used by Bourdieu (1977:655) with its sociological meaning i.e. the social context, the social setting, or the social situation.

approach let us define some key concepts in his theory. These include the notions of ‘Field’, ‘habitus’ and ‘symbolic capital’.

1. Presenting key concepts in Bourdieu’s model with a special reference to the data of the present study

‘Field’ has been defined by Bourdieu (1991: 232) as a “social space or network of objective relations between positions”. This means that field is a social context or a social network i.e. a set of social ties that are established and maintained through the use of language by a given social group. Bourdieu (ibid: 232) does not use the concept of position as a stable social position in society but he uses it in a dynamic manner. Positions are dynamic in the sense that they are related to symbolic social capital that can be cashed in the social group. They are also dynamic for the concept of field is considered by Bourdieu (1991: 230) as:

“Highly unstable and subject to continuous symbolic struggles involving forces of transformation and conservation of the relative value of different kinds of capitals”

Bourdieu’s discussion of the dynamicity of social position in human groups is relevant to our analysis of Mzabi and Kabyle minorities of Oran. The positions of Kabyle and Mzabi speakers are presently quite different from the positions they used to have previously in Oran Mainstream Algerian Arabic speech groups. In a previous language preference investigation that we carried out in 2004 we found that members of these minority groups stigmatized Berber as being the language which is outdated and the one they use the least right after Standard Arabic. Their attitudes have been changing since then. Kabyle and Mzabi informant alike seem to display quite

positive attitudes towards their Berber varieties (Mzabi and Kabyle).

‘Symbolic Capital³’ may be equated with the outcome that one obtains thanks to his linguistic competence. It is related to the social prestige that the speaker accumulates through his linguistic practices. As it has been stated above this capital may be cashed in different forms. It is not only economical (money or property) but also cultural (Knowledge, skills, and education) and most importantly social (accepted membership to a social network, newly established acquaintances, and memberships to particular social groups).

If we relate the notion of ‘*symbolic capital*’ to the study that we carried on the Berber minorities of Oran, many observations have been made in relation to the outcomes of using Kabyle and Mzabi in the Berber inner networks of this city . We noticed, for example, that speaking Mzabi may be a very good help in Mzabi social networks. This may bring immediate economic capital⁴. Being a member of the Mzabi Social network also grants cultural capital in the form of formal

³ Capital, in Bourdieu (1991: 656) terms, is not necessarily linguistic, but also economic like cash or assets, and even cultural (knowledge acquired previously, skills, and formal education).

⁴ In wholesale trade in general and in wholesale hardware trade in particular, Mzabi traders may have access to a range of trade support from their fellows. They are for example granted a 0% interest loan to start their businesses. They are also given facilities in terms of payment of orders i.e. they are allowed to pay for the goods they purchase after they sell them. They are granted a 3% discount on all goods, and they are granted priority for important goods. Members of the Mzabi community have an informal system of finance that is based on the Bait al Maal (the treasury house). This informal financial institution is present in all the cities of Algeria. It is compulsory for all members to donate yearly from their revenues. The money collected may be used by the community to finance marriages, businesses, houses and flats purchasing, and to help the poor Mzabi members

education. Children of Mzabi Parents are granted free private courses in most subjects in the Mzabi cultural associations. They are at the same time given courses in Mzabi to maintain this variety in their verbal repertoire; they are besides given courses in religious education to promote and to maintain the Ibhadite⁵ Islamic trend in these children.

‘*Habitus*⁶’ refers to a set of predefined social linguistic behaviour. These linguistic pre- dispositions are responsible for the speaker’s attitudes towards the languages or the varieties at his disposal. These pre-dispositions are also responsible for the way he perceives his linguistic behaviour, and the way he uses language. The origin of these dispositions can be traced back as far as in the language experiences of early childhood. The nature of these pre-dispositions is a well structured and a long lasting one. They are structured in the sense that they are strongly tied with the social context in which they have been originally acquired (Childhood); accordingly, they are long lasting in the senses that are deeply rooted in One’s life history. Madsen (2008: 50) argues that: “*Habitus* is based on the speaker’s experience as a participant in various fields of social life and develops in accordance with one’s life trajectories. It is to be understood as practical sense rather than an intellectual consciousness Bourdieu develops the notion of ‘*habitus*’ to account for an observed general tendency of conservation with respect to societal social differences” (Madsen 2008: 50)

This is related in Bourdieu’s terms (1991:235) to the notion of acceptance of one’s social position in the group. This acceptance is tacit in nature. If we correlate acceptance to the

⁵ The majority of Mzabi speakers follow the Ibhadite religious trend

⁶ ‘*Habitus*’ is an old sociological term, but Bourdieu uses this term to mean a set of dispositions. These dispositions generate practices and attitudes that are very much like norms(Myers Scotton, 2007: 114)

notion of symbolic power, speakers may either accept the power relation and respect their social position or reject these positions and challenge the power hierarchy in the social group. In this vein Bourdieu (1991: 163) states that:

“ It is as structured and structuring instruments of communication and knowledge that ‘ symbolic systems’ fulfil their political function, as instruments which help to ensure that one class dominates another(symbolic violence) by bringing their own distinctive power to bear on the relations of power which underlie them and thus by contributing in Weber’s terms to the domestication of the dominated” Bourdieu (1991: 167).

Language is implied as a one of the symbolic systems available to members of social groups. It is also a strong factor in the shaping of the power relations within these social groups. Mastery of languages may function as a linguistic capital which grants “*profit of social distinction to speakers*” (Bourdieu, 1991: 77)⁷. Symbolic power relations are rarely peaceful; accordingly members of social groups are continually fighting to gain representation in their groups. They also try to impose their own rules of conduct or the rules of conduct of the groups to which they belong. Bourdieu (1991:234) states in this vein that:

“The most resolutely objectivist theory must take account of agents’ representation of the social world, and more precisely, of the contribution they make to the construction of the vision of this world, and thereby to the very construction of this world via the labour of representation (in all senses of the term) that they continually perform in order to impose their own vision of the world or the vision of

⁷ Cf Madsen(2008: 51)

their own position in this world, that is their social identity. The perception of the social world is the product of a double social structuring." (Bourdieu, 1991:234)

This statement clearly highlights a vision of society which functions on the basis of control patterns and challenges to these control patterns. These challenges to the power relations have been noticed in the Mzabi community of Oran. There are Different groups of Mzabi Speakers in Oran. These constitute first, second and third generation groups. The first generation group constitutes the most conservative group in terms of social conduct, language use, and assimilation in the main stream of Oran society while there are two different tendencies in the second generation group. Some members of this group accept the social rules of conduct and conform to them while others simply put into question these norms and strongly challenge them⁸.

Bourdieu's approach is not only relevant to our investigation of Berber minorities in relation to power in minority groups, but it is also relevant to our study of the dynamics of these

⁸ The Mzabi first generation group is conservative in the sense that they do not assimilate to the Oran majority group in terms of social, cultural, and most importantly in terms of linguistic behaviour. They have a philosophy of life that is based on an avoidance of spending one's money easily, an avoidance of mainstream culture (music, sports...), and an utmost attachment to the original customs and traditions. This group is considered as the norms protector. This group establishes the rules of conduct in the whole Mzabi minority. Some members of the second generation Group strongly challenge this supremacy. They display their disapproval in their daily routines and social conducts. They, for example, overtly show their economic status and assimilate to the mainstream of Oran culture. They even show that in their linguistic behaviour by displaying a kind of Oran Algerian Arabic-Mzabi mixed code.

power relations in the Berber minorities of Oran. This approach integrates micro sociolinguistic instances of language use with macro sociolinguistic patterns of language use. Bourdieu (1977b: 657) mentions, for example, patterns of language use involving varieties of French in code switching, and style shifting. Here is the example he gives of an old woman who lives in a small village in Béarn (a south western province in France)

“The old lady] at one moment used “provincialised French” to address a shopkeeper’s wife, a young woman originating from another large market town in Béarn; [...] the next moment, she spoke in Béarnais (the local dialect) to a woman who lived in the town but who was originally from (the villages) and more or less of her own age; then she used a French that if not “correct” was at least strongly “corrected” to address a minor official in the town; and finally she spoke in Béarnais to a road worker in the town, aged about fifty”. (Bourdieu, 1977b: 657)

The situation described by Bourdieu (ibid: 657) in this example resembles the one which has been described by Gumperz (1972: 82) when he illustrates situational code switching in Norway. Bourdieu (ibid: 658) argues that, the speaker evaluates the different contextual cues inherent to the situation before making language choices. He i.e. the speaker also tries to anticipate his interlocutors’ reception of the message. These two criteria guide his language choice, and they also function as constraints to the type of code switching that he is going to display.

Bourdieu's (1991) theory of language, power and identity has been taken up by many researchers in contact linguistics. Myers Scotton (2007: 30) states in this vein that:

“Bourdieu (1991) popularized the notion of thinking of the linguistic varieties we command as **symbolic capita**⁹. This idea applies not just to dialects, but also to the different languages in a bilingual repertoire.”(Myers Scotton 2007:30)

Myers Scotton (ibid: 30) goes even further and acknowledges the relevance of Bourdieu's (1991) model to her socio-psychological ‘Rationale Model’ (2001), and states that:

“Such a model can be applied to linguistic choices. The basic idea is that speakers are selecting their choices rationally if they make choices based on weighing costs and rewards of competing choices” (Myers Scotton, ibid: 114)

2. Some Criticisms to Bourdieu's ‘Theory of Social Practice’

Bourdieu (1991) theory has been challenged regarding one of his central principles which is the one of ‘*Habitus*’. The criticism put forward relates to the fact that Bourdieu's definition of ‘*Habitus*’ does not consider the important role of the individual in the process of Power enforcement. The second criticism is related to the idea that habitus is considered by Bourdieu as a static construct which entails potential changeability (Madsen, 2008: 51). A third criticism points to the idea that Bourdieu accounts rarely for meta-linguistic processes in the making up of ‘*Habitus*’. These meta-linguistic processes include ‘*cognitive* and discursive processes’ (Agha, 2007: 229). This counter argument is particularly evident in contemporary discourse and conversational studies. Madsen (2007: 229) argues in this vein that:

⁹ Emphasis is mine

“Within contemporary discourse studies, discourse is generally understood as involving more meaningful human semiotic activities than merely linguistic” (Madsen, 2007: 51)

Bourdieu theory (1991) has also been criticized, for he gives a paramount importance to the concept of symbolic power at the expense of downplaying the equal importance of solidarity in vernacular varieties. Recent conversational and discursive investigations of code switching in minority groups contexts demonstrated that code switching functions primarily as a marker of solidarity and as a symbol of group identity. In the same vein Gumperz (1982: 97) talked about the dichotomy we/they codes in code switching. He (ibid: 98) made a clear categorization of the two codes in terms of the functions that they fulfil in the social group. Gumperz (ibid: 98) states that the primary criterion that may be used to differentiate the two codes is the solidarity one. The two codes are distributed as follows:

- The ‘we’ code tends to be associated with in group relations and informal activities. It also tends to be aesthetically undervalued in the social group.
- The ‘they’ code is associated with the majority group; accordingly, it is used as the means of out group communication with the main stream community.

Gumperz (1982: 100) also relates the ‘we code’ ‘they code’ distinction to the attitudes of Minority speakers towards the languages which make up their linguistic repertoires, and towards code switching of these languages or varieties. He (ibid, 100) talks, for example, of match guise procedure in which speakers are asked to comment on recorded stretches of

talk in the varieties in use in their community. They display attitudes ‘personal’, ‘subjective’, involvement’ with the ‘*we code*’, while they display deference attitudes such as ‘objective’, ‘detached’, and ‘distance attitudes’ towards the ‘*they code*’. This match guise procedure has been put in question by many code switching researchers (Winford; 2003: 78; Myers Scotton, 2007: 138) on the basis that it may fail to show objectivity by the informants. This may be related, for example, to the gender of the person being in the recording. The issue of the scientific validity of this procedure is still a controversial one. The classical elicitation procedure based on the interviewing of informants via questionnaires may be an alternative to the match guise procedure.

In a similar vein, Gal (1978) investigated the patterns of language choice in the Hungarian-German bilingual community of a border town called Oberwartin in eastern Austria¹⁰. The study which has been conducted by this scholar (ibid) was directed to the observation of language choice patterns in relation to different social contexts. Gal’s study shows that Hungarian symbolizes the local traditional agricultural culture, whereas German seems to symbolize modernity and non local values. Gal (1978) could also

¹⁰ Oberwart is situated near the borders between Austria and Hungary. People in this town and surrounding farms found themselves part of Austria after 2nd world war; hence, German became the official language while Hungarian became a minority language in this town. Oberwart is regarded as a town which has an agricultural tradition and vocation; this town has however undergone some deep social changes due to a rapid economic growth. This growth offered the natives of this community the chance to work in jobs other than agriculture. As a result an opposition is created between the values signalled by the waged work and the ones signalled by peasants. These values are represented in the two languages of the community i.e. Hungarian and German.

demonstrate the strong correlation between the individual's language choices and his/her age. Language choice patterns in Gal's study (ibid) showed for example that old speakers preferred Hungarian, and that young speakers chose German even if they were addressed in Hungarian. These results pushed her (ibid: 231) to talk about a process of language shift which was in progress. The argument put forward by Gal (ibid: 234) is that activities which were in the past typically associated with Hungarian are now associated with German. This process of language shift is, presently, at an advanced stage. In an on the sociolinguistic situation of Oberwart, Myers Scotton (2007: 91) states that:

“The number of Hungarian speakers is declining. The small size of the community makes the difference here, as well as the norm to speak German in the town when German monolinguals are present. All the Hungarians are bilingual in German, the only official language in Austria. Further, German is the language associated with socio-economic mobility and jobs in the town.”
(Myers Scotton, 2007: 92)

The correlation between age and patterns of language use seem to have an important role in language shift in Oberwart community. This correlation has been confirmed in many studies carried on diverse bilingual communities (the Vietnamese minority in the united states, the Armenian minority of Jordan, the Hungarian minority of Slovakia, and the Chinese minority of Tyneside England). The arguments made in these studies are to their majority based on a questionnaire elicitation procedure.

In a similar vein, in a previous investigation (Benhattab, 2004: 110) of language preferences in the Kabyle and Mzabi Minorities of Oran, we observed similar tendencies in our Berber informants. Age seems to be correlated with language preferences in both the Kabyle, and the Mzabi communities of Oran. We made the hypothesis that this may signal a pattern of intergenerational language shift.

Gal (1978) also demonstrated in her investigation that the interlocutor is an important factor to the individual's language choice. Gal (ibid: 229) could demonstrate the correlation between the speaker's network and his patterns of language choice. This idea has been taken up by Milroy (1987) in her study of the relationship between speaker's social networks nature and their patterns of language choice.

Conclusion:

The present paper highlights the relevance of Bourdieu's theory of social practice to the Berber minorities of Oran. The preliminary observations that we could reach in this paper show the relevance of a dynamic perspective in the interpretation of micro-sociolinguistic phenomena in a contact situation. The application of Bourdieu's approach to the Mzabi minority of Oran reveals that of the strongest points in Bourdieu's model is its dynamicity. Another strong point that we have noticed throughout our analysis is the possibility to integrate a micro and a macro sociolinguistic in the same analysis.

The Mzabi and the Kabyle minorities of Oran seem to be in a dynamic process of social change as they seem to display different attitudes towards Berber and the other languages that

make up their verbal repertoire. This seems to be related to different parameters such as the emigrants' generations to which they belong. The power relations seem to be particularly dynamic between first and second generation Berber speakers. Second generation speakers display language and other social behaviour that signal that they overtly or covertly challenge the social norms that have been established by older generations. These observations need to be investigated more deeply in future research. This research will be devoted to the study of the correlations between the dynamics of language use and the patterns of social practice in the Berber minorities of Oran.

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