The Mother Tongue and Related Issues in Algeria

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I. Introduction

The definition of a *First Language*, a *Mother Tongue*, a *Native Language, an Arterial Language* or simply *L1* has long been debated in the literature from various perspectives: Linguistics, Psycholinguistics, Sociolinguistics and Didactics in particular. These terms have often been tied up with the concept of a *Native Speaker*, i.e., someone who has 'learnt' through what the behaviourists call stimulus-response behaviours (e.g. Mummy milk all gone! For "Mummy the milk has all gone" or "Mummy, I finished the milk"), or who has acquired during his socialisation process (the holophrastic, the structural and the syntactic stages) a communication tool (Language) which enables him to talk and communicate with his mother in the first place and with his immediate family surrounding before he/she communicates with other members (children and adults) of the community or society where he grows up.

II. The Concept of the Mother Tongue

There are some tentative definitions of the above cited terms. Mahon, A. (1999) explains that "*Mother Tongue*" *is the label mostly used by linguists"* while "*First Language is said to be the language of infancy"*. 'Native language' is defined as "*... the language of the individual's society, i.e., the native speaker's mother tongue is his/her native language.* He concludes: "*Children succeed in acquiring their native language so quickly from the data or the language used around them"*. (p. 109)

Such a definition does not necessarily tell us what exactly the 'Mother Tongue' is? What is its impact on the child's language acquisition process as a whole? Indeed, we have no right at the guessing of the workings of an inaccessible mind! It does not also tell us shall we confine or restrict the definition of the 'Mother Tongue' to make it a sociolinguistic or an educational construct, allowing the use of the term as a basic concept in the field of theoretical and empirical enquiry.

The opacity in defining the "Mother Tongue" has long been subject to debate. One traces it back to Bloomfield's definition of this term in his famous book Language (1933). He was most probably influenced by Whorfianism (1921) and the issue on Linguistic Relativity developed earlier by W. Von Humbolt's (1836) under Linguistic Determinism or the Native speaker's Linguistic Ability, e.g., '*Does the work 'blick' exist in English*?' and '*Does the word 'bnick*' exist in English?' According to his linguistic ability, the native speaker's answer is: *'blick' is possible in English*; *'bnick' does not exist in English*[107]. In fact, neither of these two words exists in English.

Similarly, the structural view as expounded in the generative enterprise does not help much in defining the 'Mother Tongue'. For Chomsky (1968), the child's acquisition of language is part of a subconscious process that develops as the child grows up to 'absorb' his 'Mother Tongue'. He argues: "*An infant is born with the rudiments of language and the will to talk"* (1968: 147)

The second question often raised in this vein relates to the issue on how many 'mother tongues' or 'native languages' can an individual have? This question is often raised in cases of children whose parents have a different L1, which is often the case of native bilinguals. Yet, one may as well ask what the first L1 is in this case? Obviously, the Mother's Tongue comes first then the Father's Tongue, though this issue remains open to debate as we live in a world where the father

[107] Syllable Structure Conditions and constraints push the native speaker to reject "bnick' as a possible word in English simply because no word in English starts with the cluster *≠bn ....≠.

is sometimes, not to say often, closer to the child than the mother. The affluent society in the West and better job opportunities for women and wives have given rise to child reactions such as: 'Mum's not here Dad!' and situations where the father nurses the child and spends more time with him/her than the mother. Exception is made here of cases of breast feeding, although the breast has been replaced in developed societies by the child's feeding-bottle.

This issue is even more complex in cases where the parents are themselves from different origins (e.g., an Algerian father and a Russian mother) with children born in a host community or country. Do we have then one L1 and two MTs (Mother Tongues), three L1s (L Ones) or three MTs as the parents will certainly use the host country's language to communicate with their children. Finally, mention should be made on questions related to the acquisition of a language from birth, what the impact of the critical age is and the question on socio-cultural identity, among other issues to be raised in this vein.

More recently, publications on the concept of 'Native speaker' appear in Alan Davies' book The Native speaker: Myth and Reality (2008). There are papers such as that by Love Nigel, and Umberto Ansaldo "The Native Speaker and the Mother Tongue" (2010), or some online articles such as «*Language Proficiency: Defining Levels Avoids Confusion*" (2013) to cite but a few. The common denominator in these scholarly works is that the concept of 'Native Speaker' cannot be used at random or as a cover term for 'Mother Tongue'. They all insist on the idea that this term involves cross-disciplinary areas and by this token, it has to be put in its context when used by the linguist, the language teacher, the politician, the decision maker, etc. It is in this sense, we believe, that it has turned to be a myth or a reality. So basically, caution is required when concepts such as Mother *Tongue, Native Language, Arterial Language* or *L1* are used for the description of facts of Language.

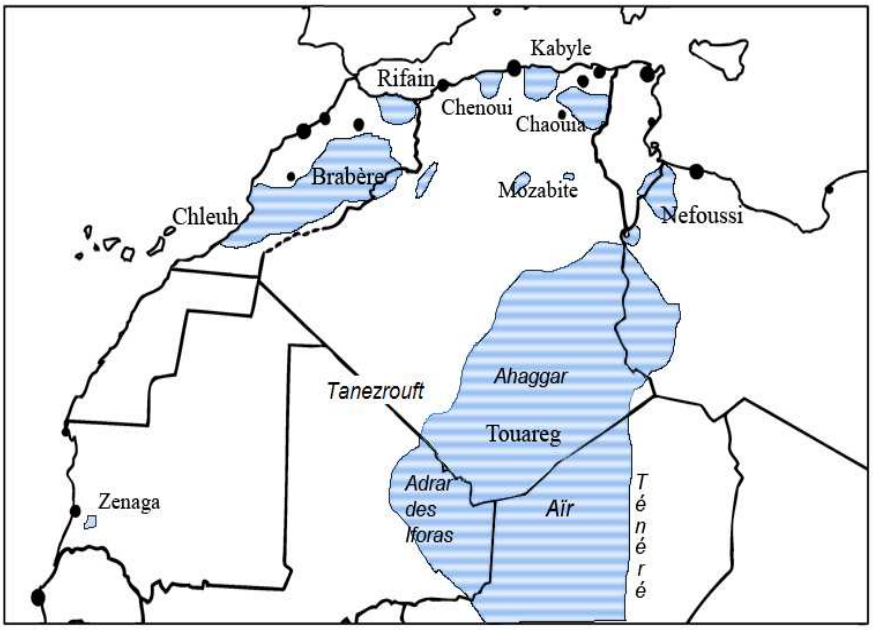
III. Minority Language vs. Majority Language

The issue on Minority Language(s) and Majority Language(s) has also long been subject to debate. We shall not embark on the theoretical and empirical persuasions as to what the characteristics of these two concepts are. In the *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* (Routledge, UK) for instance, and from Volume 1 (1980) to Volume 34 (2013) one notices a proliferation of definitions of these terms. Each definition takes special cases where the language being investigated presents characteristic features of a Minority Language or a Majority Language on the basis of a number of pre-established sociolinguistic and economic parameters. In Volume 11 (1990), François Grin argues that under "The Economic Approach to Minority Languages", stress is put on the fundamental economic factors that may change a minority language into a majority language. The author explains that money alone or financial investments are necessary but not sufficient for the uprising of a Minority Language. On the other hand, in '*Endangered languages'* (2013), Peter K. Austin and Julia Sallabank use statistics that indicates that more than half the 7000 languages of the world are endangered because they are not being learnt by children. The authors add that if nothing is done, these will ultimately disappear along with the old generation. Similarly, Ken Hale explains in "*Endangered Languages and the Safeguarding of Diversity*" that although language loss is part and parcel of the history of languages prior to the emergence of Empires and States, endangered languages are part of the process of the dangers inherent in the loss of biological diversity on this Earth.

IV. The Present Approach

We shall base our observation and description of the case of language use in Algeria on Fishman's Paradigm (1991) in order to scale the languages at work and see how one can classify them from a sociolinguistic perspective in terms of Minority Languages or Majority Languages. We shall then mention 'en passant' how the school may use the First Language of the child to introduce him/her to the Standard Form of Arabic in a real classroom situation and teaching in Algeria.

Let us first start with the presentation of the two maps below which give a general view of Berber varieties in Algeria and its neighboring countries.



Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grandes-aires-linguistiques-berb%C3%A8res-v2.png

The display map above shows the major varieties of Berber in Algeria and the neighbouring countries Morocco and Tunisia. The Touareg variety spreads southwards towards Mali and Niger. The Kabyle, Chaouia and Chenoui varieties are closely spread in the North Eastern part of the country. The remaining geographical space represents Algerian Spoken Arabic.

In the North Eastern part of Algeria, we get the following display map:

Source:http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grandes-aires-linguistiques-berb%C3%A8res-v2.png

One notices that the Chaouia variety covers a larger geographical space compared to the Kabyle or Chenoui varieties. Here again, the remaining space is for Algerian Spoken Arabic.

Statistically, we get: Algerian Arabic which is spoken by about 72% and Berber (or its varieties) by 27.4%. Yet, no one denies the fact that Berber is the 'native language' of most of the Algerians. The question to be raised is what is Minor and what is Major in sociolinguistic terms, not in institutional terms? Let us see how this is interpreted by Fishman's Sociolinguistic Profile Formula (1991)

Fishman proposes three basic value positions for Minority Native Languages. We shall use his scale and adapt it to the Algerian context for a more objective language management in Algeria where the so called 'minority languages' can be integrated within a more global language teaching program.
Joshua Fishman (1991) advocates in such cases a more dynamic, rather than static or simple minded maintenance of the minority languages. The latter should be considered as part of a more global vision on maintaining traditional cultures for their beauty and their being part of human values which deserve assistance, fostering and encouragement, rather than struggle in any way and with any means for their mere "preservation" in terms of traditional values.

Off hand, this may be seen as a clue on how to avoid divergence within unity, i.e., the feeling of belonging to a Country, a Nationality, a Religion, etc. To achieve this objective, decision makers and syllabus designers must integrate the minority native languages in a broader national (cultural) syllabus in order to avoid considering each local culture as typical of a region and thus develop a pseudo feeling of identity within a larger community. This is part of a long lasting debate on the mother tongue and the Arabic taught at school in Algeria which up to now, as far as we gather, has not brought to light any possible solution by decision makers. We have to explore how the child has acquired his mother tongue - under what conditions, circumstances, etc.- in Algeria, identify and classify the favourable and unfavourable factors for the child's motivation and his learning of what is referred to as Standard Arabic by the institutional and ministerial instructions in Algeria. We have also to consider the issue of a smooth transition for the child from the 'Home Language' to the 'School Language' instead of the current abrupt transition from mother tongue to school tongue together with the pedagogical implications in each case (a smooth transition versus an abrupt transition).
Let us now consider Fishman's paradigm and how it applies to the Algerian context.
Fishman basically distinguishes three value positions:

- The maintenance and renewal of native languages can be voluntary,
- 'Minority rights' need not interfere with 'majority rights',
- 'Bilingualism is a benefit for all' (pp. 82-84).

According to Fishman, there are eight stages of language loss. Stage Eight representing a phase of language death or total extinction in comparison to Stage One which represents dynamic survival. Symptomatic of Stage Eight are those minority native languages where very few elderly people speak them in very confined areas and social groups. These involve hardly any communication with the outside world (cf. cases of American Indian tribes such as Salish in Montana). Such minority native languages are often referred to as tribal languages. To the best of our knowledge, there are no such cases in Algeria.
Stage Seven involves those languages spoken by some adults yet not by all adults in a given speech community. Stage Six is symptomatic of those languages where inter-generational use is absent (children-adult use of the same language at home does not exist or does not take place. In this Stage Six, the children do not speak the language in question. Here again, only a thorough description of language use in Algeria can bring some answer(s) as to whether such minority native languages under Stage Six exist in Algeria. And if this is the case, then what would be the leading factors that help us include them on a scale for Algeria (types of users – male / female; social settings, etc.)
Stage Five seems to be of interest to us in the Algerian context. In fact, Stage Five involves cases where the language in question is used in force and in a dynamic way within the social and

regional boundaries of a given community or communities. Moreover, minority languages along this scale (Stage Five) tend to be used outside home (in the street, at school, etc.). Yet, these may not be identified in official teaching syllabuses.
Fishman recognises that language revitalization at these particular stages (S8 to S5) is less demanding, cost-effective and does not require the involvement of the dominant Language(s). In Stages 8 to 5 where local cultures may prevail, group tensions or conflicts are generally absent. They have, if they do occur, no significant impact on a Global Teaching Program. Cases for Algeria may be Touareg (Chleu), Mosabit, etc.
Stages Four down to Stage One include those Minority Native Languages that enjoy a legal status with in-school and out-school vitality, as well as the use in local administrative places and in government spheres. These are often indicative of a smooth language management based on a tacit agreement between language policy makers and language users, rather than coercive language planning based on "made-to-be-applied" ministerial instructions on language use for a country, thus sustaining the unsustainable slogan on language heterogeneity and the 'one-language-only' strategy that has proven to be inadequate in Algeria and elsewhere.

Stages One to Four along Fishman's scale may be considered applicable when it comes to observing, analysing and discussing the Algerian linguistic situation today. This can provide substantial solutions provided the issue is handled by language technicians in terms of data collection, language attitudes, language use and language effectiveness, technological transfer, translation needs, cultural exportation and recognition, etc.). Language planning experts and language practitioners (teachers, syllabus designers, textbook writers, etc.) can also contribute to this endeavour with their experience, skills and know-how. The fact is that any effort to bring about legal changes on the basis of the scope of users and effectiveness of the native language in question will almost certainly trigger off reactions from the majority. These are some of the issues that have led to blocks of resistance or total rejection by the "Arabic-Only" movement that Algeria has witnessed since Independence.

Basically, Stage Four sees the minority language as a necessity at the level elementary education. It fits well into a scheme of using it as a language of instruction. The minority language along this stage (Stage 4) is not to be seen as a school tongue per se but rather as a basis for the learning of the school tongue through the mother tongue.
In Stage Three (S3), the minority language is used in other spheres (factories, banks, the post office, etc.) but not by white collar workers or managers (cases of dialects, mixtures of French, Arabic and Berber).
Stage Two (S2) involves the use in government offices, the press, the media, etc. This supposes a standardisation of the writing system (yet, it may be limited to a local or national use).
Stage One (S1) involves the use of the Minority Language at higher government levels, as it is the case for American Indian languages (Navaho etc.). This is not the case in Algeria.

This Theoretical Paradigm gives us a clearer picture of how to scale the minority languages in the Algerian situation. The question remains to examine the converging or diverging factors between the languages at work, i.e., Standard Arabic, French, Algerian Arabic and Berber in order to incorporate them in a global teaching program in Algeria. We shall leave this question open to debate.

We end up this presentation of the mother tongue and related issues with a general view on the child and his language. The aim behind this is to stress on the fact that issues in this vein have not been taken into consideration by decisions makers when it comes to the question of what to teach in our schools and the place and role of the mother tongue in the learning process. The abrupt transition we witness today from mother tongue to school tongue has resulted in the child failures that we witness today in Algeria, not only at school but also in the society.

Right from his early childhood, a normal child is pre-disposed to utter the sounds and build up words recognisable as Mother Tongue. These constitute the language background that he inherits

from his immediate environment (Family: mother, father, brothers, sisters, etc.). As he grows up, he develops this language and makes it his own (individualisation) until he reaches the phase just before the socialisation process (kitten garden, schooling, primary and elementary education) begins and which makes him feel as a member of a given social group, community, or society.

We shall not embark on the well known, yet inevitable, first language acquisition stages to present all the different language acquisition processes the child undergoes before he gets to school. Suffice here to say that they are three: the holophrastic phase (sound recognition, one object = one word, e.g. nose, head, arms, toy, dog, etc., the Structural phase: recognition of discourse categories such as nouns, pronouns, articles, verbs, adjectives, discourse markers, etc. A process of over generalisation often takes place at this stage as in *Mummy, milk all gone! (for "Mummy the milk has all gone", or he **goed* for he "went". At the same time, the child understands simple orders such as "stop it!", "don't cry!" etc. Finally, we have the Syntactic phase where the child utters simple active declarative sentences such as "I want milk" or "Mumy, I love you" before moving on to more complex sentence structure constructions as the case may be for reported speech "Dad told me Mum loves me" or the passive structure as in "Catty is kicked by Doggy", etc. If the child produces complex sentence structures for his age, this is often indicative of his / her brightness and high IQ or 'enfant éveillé'.

Many Scholars have identified this process of first language acquisition whereby the child engages in communication with distorted sentences before he internalises adult grammar and learns how to speak. In fact, he has the ability to acquire the language used around him and proceed to the acquisition of his own mother tongue repertoire that will later on be "reshuffled", "re-modelled" "re-organised" during his socialisation process (schooling) to make him acquire the first foundations of his community's 'forces propres' (i.e., his "Cultural Identity"). All this seems to be left aside when we observe how the Algerian child reaches school. He is led to 'erase' all his language acquisition luggage and background and start from scratch on his very first day at school. This is what we referred to earlier as 'abrupt transition' that not only frustrates the child but de-motivates him/her from learning in general.

Bloomfield (1933); Chomsky (1965); Robinett and Schachter (1991), and many more scholars agree that the child is innately endowed with the capacity to acquire the language and later on its culture. CHOMSKY.N (1965) argues that the child is not only biologically but also intellectually predisposed to such a great achievement (language acquisition) that needs a constant exposure to the mother tongue. APRIL Mahon (1999) states in this vein: C*hildren acquire their native language very quickly and easily from the available data, the language used around them.* (p. 109).

On the socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of the issue at stake, Vygotsky's approach (1962) to child language acquisition recognises three main steps. In the first step, the child uses social speech under the form of a "monologue". He mostly uses this form of discourse as verbal behaviour for his own actions, attitudes, and sometimes feelings (also known as baby talk), rather than for communication purposes. Yet, such a "monologue" develops as the child grows up, into a form of "inner speech" that Vygotsky defines as thinking embodied into words. The child has thus reached a stage where his communication has become purposeful. It helps him identify himself inside as well as outside a social group, community, etc. (known as "individuality") to detach himself or belong to a particular group, community, culture, etc. Vygotsky (1962) states in this respect: "*Direct communication between minds is impossible not only physically but psychologically. Communication can be achieved only in a roundabout way. Thought passes first, through meanings, and then through minds"* (p. 64).

This has in fact come as a reaction to an earlier approach as advocated in Piaget (1955). He looks at language acquisition as basically composed of two steps. The first one or egocentric speech is the step where the child feels he is at the centre of the world. He speaks irrespective of the opinion(s) of others, mainly if they are of the same age group. However, Piaget argues that with

time and a more active involvement in social activities (home, kitten garden, school, playground, etc.), the child becomes more and more aware that he belongs to a social group. Hence, egocentric speech tends to fade away while socialized speech prevails. Throughout this process of language acquisition, tensions, internal and external conflicts give and take processes, are triggered off as the child slowly builds up his personality and feeling of belonging to a social group or community.

The Algerian new born acquires the mother tongue used in his region. If he was born in Tizi Ouzou, Ghardaïa or Batna, he acquires one variety of Berber first. If he is brought up elsewhere in Algeria, his mother tongue is often the local variety of Algerian Spoken Arabic with perhaps some French for some city dwellers. However, when he goes to school he learns a new variety of Arabic referred to as "Arabe Standard". On the educational ground, there is no harm, we believe, if the home language is used at school for a smooth transition towards Standard Arabic. A case in point would be the teaching of Standard Arabic colour terms based on dialectal Arabic, e.g. colour terms zraq → azraq; bjad → abjad for the dialectal form and the standard form respectively, or the dialectal forms for numbers as in wahad, tlata, rab9a for wahidun, thalatha, arba9a of Standard Arabic. This issue remains open to debate for decision makers, syllabus designers, parents and teachers alike.

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