

*Bilingualism and multiculturalism in Algeria  
An Expedient for political appeasement and stability or  
cultural diversity?*

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**Abstract:**

Multi-ethnic countries consider monolingualism a safe anchor against all sources of discord and disunity. Yet, the sweeping clamors for instilling democracy usher in a shift in that linguistic arrangement and the adoption of either bilingualism or multilingualism. In modern times, this tendency has become more pronounced than before for resolving all socio-cultural frictions. In the specific case of Algeria, the government elevated Amazight into a national and official language through the 2016 Constitution, arguing that doing so would protect the Amazigh's basic linguistic and cultural rights. To pursue this study, three elements were explored: a concept map of monolingualism, bilingualism, and language policy; the linguistic formula of Algeria before the introduction of the linguistic reform; and the appraisal of the impacts of that change. The findings indicated that the acknowledgment of Amazight as an official language was a wise decision to satisfy the grievances of the Berber activists who were preaching schism between the Arabs and the Berber.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism; Law and order; Linguistic and Cultural tensions; Monolingualism.

### الملخص:

تعتبر الدول متعددة الأعراق أن أحادية اللغة هي أساس أمن ضد جميع مصادر الخلاف والانقسام. ومع ذلك، فإن الدعوات الكاسحة لغرس الديمقراطية تؤدي لامحالة إلى تحول في هذا الترتيب اللغوي واعتماد إما ثنائية اللغة أو التعددية اللغوية. في العصر الحديث أصبح هذا الاتجاه أكثر انتشاراً من ذي قبل لحل جميع الاحتكاكات الاجتماعية والثقافية. وفيما يخص الجزائر، رقت الأمازيغية إلى لغة وطنية ورسمية من خلال دستور 2016 من أجل حماية الحقوق اللغوية والثقافية الأساسية للأمازيغ. ولإجراء هذه الدراسة، تم استعمال ثلاثة عناصر: مفاهيم أحادية اللغة وثنائية اللغة وسياسة اللغة، الصيغة اللغوية للجزائر قبل إدخال الإصلاح اللغوي، وتقييم آثار ذلك التغيير. أشارت النتائج إلى أن الاعتراف بالأمازيغية كلغة رسمية كان قراراً حكيماً لسد مظالم النشطاء الأمازيغ الذين كانوا يدعون إلى الانقسام بين العرب والأمازيغ.

### Introduction:

Though language is a potent means of communication, yet its cultural load and impress on a state's socio-political and economic integrity is so important as to interfere with the country's linguistic map. This implies that a government's decision as to monolingualism, bilingualism, or multilingualism is, intrinsically, linked with the preservation of law and order. On the other hand, this decision might be altered over time given the specific external encroachments that could impact the evolution of a society. In this context, the Algerian government moved from a monolingual situation (where

Arabic was the sole language reckoned officially as a national language) to a bilingual one through the acknowledgment of Amazight as an official language as a means for cultural diversity, and a stratagem for appeasing the Berber masses who were claiming for a linguistic and cultural change. To scrutinize the extent to which this decision was to promote those goals, it is pertinent first to get an insight into the concepts of monolingualism, bilingualism, and linguistic policy.

### **Conceptual framework:**

This section delves into the explanation of the above-mentioned terms. For analysis purposes, an attempt will first be made to elucidate the expression of linguistic policy.

### **Language policy:**

The concept of language policy refers to the government's legislation regarding the state of a language or sets of languages. It can take the form of a clause within a constitution, a language law, a cabinet document, or an administrative regulation. It occurs generally as a result of socio-economic needs, in case for instance of ethnic competition as to the day-to-day life mechanisms, or in case of a particular group marginalization from that process (Robinson, 1988). Hence, it is designed either to promote or marginalize those languages. However, the effective and successful implementation of a language policy can by no means be ensured by the simple existence of the legislation. According to Haugen, language policy could be constructed along four steps: status planning; corpus planning (codification of its spoken or written form, its grammar, and its lexicon); implementation (ensuring a positive attitude on the part of the target population vis-à-vis the policy); and elaboration (continuous adjustment) (as cited in. Spolsky, 2004). Those stages appertain to three areas, namely writing, lexicon, and syntax. Many parameters interfere with the determination of a language status. These comprise the size of its speaking group and their socio-economic weight, as well as its use in formal communication. Another concept is also associated with language policy, viz language ideology or language beliefs. It refers to the stand and consensus of a given speech community as to its language. It is this ideology which determines the value and prestige of the language. The key actors involved in the design of a language policy and

planning are the sociologists who discern the need for action, the linguists who assess that need and secure suggestions as to the form of the language, the educators who implement the policy and provide programs, and the writers who bolster the language through continuous writing.

Depending on the specific contexts, a state can adopt a monolingual, a bilingual, or a multilingual language policy. In the past, monolingualism was generally perceived as a prime factor for enhancing political loyalty (Nodquist, 2020), and linguistic unity, especially where many dialects co-existed (Robinson, 1988). Prior to the nineteenth century, European colonial powers tried to lay their hegemonies over their Asian and African colonies not only in the political, economic, and social fields but also culturally as they imposed their languages on the subject peoples. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the majority of the emerging states decided to sketch monolingualism as a symbol of their new-founded identity, and a safe anchor against disunity.

The modern age of globalization ushered in a new era where the adoption of bilingualism or multilingualism were assumed as effective expedients for laying the ground for smooth communication, social justice, and cultural exchange. This need was conspicuously expressed by the Salzburg seminar on language learning held on December 12/17 2017 as follows: “we, the participants of Salzburg Global Seminar’s session on *Springboard for Talent: Language Learning and Integration in a Globalized World* .... call for policies that value and uphold multilingualism and language rights”. This call for multilingualism was grounded in the need to promote language diversity as the global norm, handle language discrimination, and enhance language policies that advance diversity.

Besides the shift to bilingualism or multilingualism, there developed also a tendency of adopting bilingual education which affords students opportunities for becoming bilingual and bi-literate (Bigelow and Enncer-Kananen, 2014), indicating a glaring inclination towards multilingual perspectives. This tendency was clearly displayed by the UNESCO Education Position Paper, “Education in a multilingual world” in 2003 which underlined the necessity of safeguarding linguistic diversity. In 2008, the Council of

the European Union set the objective for all European Union citizens to master two languages together with their native language.

Multilingualism is now gaining more ground. In fact, it has become more a 'way of life than a problem to be solved' (UNESCO Education Position Paper, 2003). Actually, more than half the world's population is bilingual or multilingual as a result of the movement of people, and the intensification of trade and business (Grosjean, 2020). According to Crystal, among 570 million English speakers, a large number, approximating 235 million people, are bilingual in English and another language (as cited in. Nordquist, 2020). Bilingualism and multiculturalism will continue to epitomize governments' linguistic maps in the future.

### **Monolingualism:**

Soanes (2001) defines monolingualism as the use of only one language. *The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* defines the term monolingual as a person who uses only one language but has a certain knowledge about others (Richards and Schmidt, 2011). Skutnabb Kangas affirms that monolingualism is a social construction used to valorize the dominant group and marginalize the minority groups and that it is an illness that ought to be annihilated (as cited in. Ellis, 2006). Other negative terms have been ascribed to monolingualism as "monolingual myopia", "monolingual dysfunctionism", "monolingual stupidity", and "monolingual naivety". Those terms denote clearly that those who delineate monolingualism as their language policy have certain psychological problems. On the other end of the scale, monolingualism constitutes an efficient tool for identity displacement and affirmation. This is basically the reason why monolingual speakers are currently in the minority (Erard, 2012). Some Western countries assume that monolingualism is a worldwide norm, and view bilingual or multilingual speakers as strange.

### **Bilingualism:**

The term bilingualism alludes to the ability of using two languages, however; there is no general agreement as to this utilization. Bloomfield (1933) defines the word as the 'native-

like control of two languages' (56). This control has to do with oral proficiency which might range from minimal proficiency to advanced proficiency (Naldic, 2009). In this stage, the speaker is equated with a native-like speaker. The dual language control can also be associated with the capacity of reading in two languages. According to Edwards, 'everyone is bilingual; that is there is no one in the world (no adult, anyway) who does not know at least a few words in languages other than the maternal variety' (as cited in. Ellis, 2006). A more overwhelming and comprehensive definition is that of Hamers and Blanc (2000)

Bilinguality is the psychological state of an individual who has access to more than one linguistic code as a means of social communication: the degree of access will vary along a number of dimensions which are psychological, cognitive, psycholinguistic, social psychological, sociological, sociolinguistic, sociocultural and linguistic.(6)

Bilingualism comprises simultaneous bilingualism, that is the learning and use of two languages at the same time, or subsequent bilingualism which involves the learning of a second language after one's first language. Besides the level of proficiency, other features could be added to distinguish bilingual speakers as age of acquisition, manner of acquisition, frequency of use, emotional attachment or affiliation, and domains of use (Ellis, 2006).

Experts on monolingualism and bilingualism assert that in modern times bilingual or multilingual speakers are bypassing monolingual speakers (as cited in.Ellis). Crystal (1941) made the point clear when stating

People brought up within a western society often think that the monolingualism that forms a routine part of their existence is the normal way of life for all but a few special people. They are wrong. Multilingualism is the Normal way of life for hundreds of millions all over the World. (360)

Bilingualism or multilingualism impact peoples' lives in many ways. They can act as an effective tool for annihilating

ethnic tensions and clashes, above all in states where there are several languages as India, Gambia...etc. On the other end of the scale, bilingualism can enhance the cognitive and linguistic performance of the speakers by dint of acquiring mental flexibility (Bialystok et al, 2012). This refers to the ability to comply with the current changes and handling information appropriately.

### **Algerian linguistic background before the institutionalization of Amazight:**

Prior to the independence of Algeria, Algerian linguistic policy was geared towards the valuing of classic or standard Arabic as the sole national language with a view to fostering the Algerians' political allegiance, and instituting an Arabo-Islamic homogeneity (Kaci Ould-Lamara, 2004). It should be mentioned that the desire to create an Arab national state was 'nursed' in the Arab nationalist movements led at the times by the Egyptian president, Jamel Abdenacer, and Al Baath party in Iran and Syria. The Arabization policy that followed targeted the demise of the French colonial language.

### **Institutionalization of Amazight:**

The study of a language is generally perceived as a good expedient for promoting cognition and knowledge. So, to what extent did the acknowledgment of Amazight as a national language contribute to the attainment of this objective? Before answering this question, it is interesting first to document the circumstances surrounding this acknowledgment.

The Berber people were from a long time striving to clinch their separate cultural identity, the vehicle of which was evidently the Amazight language. The first reaction to uphold their grievances was brutally put down by Boumediene's government. Since then, the Berber community felt that their inheritance would slowly vanish and die, extinguishing therefore their culture, and their souls. This is why they kept struggling by dint of different channels: writing, music, cultural associations, conferences, and political activism, both inside Algeria and outside. One significant event that was later to

impact the decision-makers was the Berber Spring which took place on April 10, 1980, following the canceling of a conference by Mouloud Mammeri in Tizi-Ouzou on ancient Berber poetry. There ensued a general strike that was harshly put down, entailing the death of 126 persons and the injury of 5000 strikers. The government ceded partially to this pressure through the creation of the Haut Commissariat de l'Amazighité (The Amazight High Commission) in 1995, and introduced the teaching of Amazight in the educational institutions belonging to the Berber provinces (as Tizi ousou, Bejaia, Bouira...). One year later, the Amazigh culture was reckoned as part of national identity, side by side with Arabic and Islamic identity virtues. In 2002, following bloody insurrections that resulted in the death of 126 citizens, president Bouteflika declared Amazight as a second national language. In 2009, a Berber TV channel was launched. In 2016, the Algerian Parliament acknowledged Amazight as a second official language. According to Abderahmane (2020), this constitutional amendment was not “a participatory constituent process”.

Overwhelmingly, The Algerian government's decision to recognize the value of the Berber language and proclaim it as a national language was grounded in two motives: firstly an anticipation of the social uprising that was nurtured by the worldwide political, economic, and socio-cultural challenges as the Arab spring; secondly the recognition of the Berber inherent right to “maintain, enjoy and develop their languages of identity and community” (The Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World, 2017) amidst the danger of language death. In this vein, some Berber activists as, Said Saadi and Abdennour Ali-Yahia, were unfavorable to it as it merely diverted the focus of the Berber community through partial concessions. The same conclusion was reached out by Bektache (2018) who in a field study canvassed the views of some Algerians (Arabs and Berbers) as to the institutionalization of Amazight. The informants, mainly the Berbers, conceived it barely as a concession to stifle radicalism



in the Amazight area, and worse still, an attempt to kill the language.

The question now worth considering is whether this decision paved the way for social progress, social justice, and participatory citizenship. The institutionalization of any marginalized language can only work properly if it is soundly integrated into the educational system, media, as well as local administration (Boukous, 2012). Let us now consider how these adjustments were made.

### **Impacts of the institutionalization of Amazight:**

A glance at the impacts of the institutionalization of Amazight would reveal incomplete and slow progress. In 2016, the language was introduced only in 22 provinces out of 48, with a number of 277,176 learners out of a total of 10 million pupils (AFP, 2016). One year later, this number increased slightly to 350,000 learners in 38 provinces. This remains yet extremely unsatisfactory. Besides, experts as Prof Abdelkader Dourari, president of the National Pedagogical and Linguistic Centre for the Teaching of Amazight, claims that the Amazight language that is actually being taught is totally strange to the language spoken by the Berber communities

Tamazight n'a jamais eu d'existence historique. Ils ont produit une langue artificielle qu'ils ont appelée Amazight et avec laquelle on a traduit la Constitution mais quelle est l'utilité de cette langue artificielle mis a part flatter notre égo ? Elle n'a aucune chance de survivre et c'est cette langue qui est enseignée à l'école.(as cited in. Dridi, 2017, para.2)

According to Prof. Dourari, the documents used in the textbook of Amazight do not really exist; they are merely 'acrobatic translations' from Arabic or French. Moreover, there are great controversies related to its transcription (as cited in.AFP, 2016). Three alphabetical systems are currently used: Latin in the Kabylie area, Arabic for the Chaouia and the Mzab, and Tifinagh for the Touareg). The ministry of education did not impose a specific transcription system: the matter was to be decided solemnly by the teachers who were supposed to know

more about the contexts and the needs involved. Dourari (nd) added other problems, namely unqualified teachers (in terms of pedagogy) and lack of standardization.

The successful integration of Amazight as a national language requires essentially a judicious reflection and study of the actual Berber languages, on the basis of which appropriate corpora could be designed. This evidently ought to be coached by experts and specialists, and the involvement of all the stakeholders.

In terms of media and local administration, one notices also slow steps. Some TV channels provide a scope for the Amazight language by dint of irregular advertising, Amazight news broadcasted once per day, and scarce cinematic productions. Arguably, the chief achievement of bilingualism in Algeria was designed for the conservation of political allegiance, and the preservation of law and order since the Berbers were reputed of being rebellious people.

### **Conclusion:**

To conclude, the institutionalization of Amazight as an official language was a wise decision to satisfy the grievances of the Berber activists who were calling for the rebirth of the Berber culture and the valuing of its language. The recognition of language diversity which took a long time to be consecrated, half a century, was an exigency that the Algerian government could hardly ignore. This exigency was portrayed, on one hand, by the Berber struggle that had taken place since independence, reaching more momentum with the evolution of the Algerian society; and on the other hand by the challenges of modern globalization, notably the integration of fast communication technologies. In fact, social networks represent easy and valuable arms for political activists as they guarantee rapid and effective contact with the masses. These constituted, glaringly, a high menace that could only be alleviated through the minimization of this dynamite pressure. Political stability primed, hence, higher than any other consideration.

By and large, the adoption of bilingualism could be considered as a safe resolution with regard to the followings: the entrenchment of political pacification and political allegiance, the acquiescing of talk about the tabooed Berber issue, the recognition of language and cultural diversity, evading thereby the danger of language death. Yet, this achievement does not mean that the Amazight language has attained a certain degree of prestige. Though it has been introduced in schools, the number of Amazight learners is still meager. Moreover, students do not display a high attraction towards this language given the problems associated with its transcription system, and the lack of a comprehensive study of the plurality of the Berber languages (Kabylie dialect, Chaouia dialect, Mozabite, and Tifinagh). The revitalization of Amazight would certainly continue to progress in the future, but this requires a sound commitment of the policy-makers. Yet, one should not lose sight of the important stratification that would continue to epitomize the Algerian linguistic map: peripheral languages as dialectal Arabic and Amazight, central languages as standard Arabic on a national character, super-central languages as standard Arabic and French on an international character, and an hyper-central language as English.

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