

Students' sociolinguistic behaviour and attitudes towards Arabic and French



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Abstract

The present work attempts to understand the linguistic experience in Algeria, an Arabic-speaking country in which the French language was strongly imposed during colonisation to the extent that today it may be, and is indeed, considered a second language. In fact, alongside Arabic, French is still used, almost spontaneously, in many public domains such as administrations, the media, and particularly in a number of streams in higher education, the focus of this research work.

It is in two university settings, the Islamic sciences department and the faculty of medicine, that we have attempted to show that French is more appropriate, or at least thought to be so, for the medical domain and exact sciences while, on the other hand, Arabic is tightly related to religious domains and social sciences. Such language relations have their roots in the Algerian educational system and some cultural and historical values.

By means of a number of sociolinguistic tools, we intend to show the extent to which students code-switch to Standard Arabic or French and the reasons and attitudes behind such linguistic behaviour.

الملخص:

يسعى هذا المقال للكشف عن إشكالية لغة التدريس الجامعي في العلوم الطبية مقارنة بقسم العلوم الإسلامية، فبينما لا يجد طلبة العلوم الإسلامية أي صعوبة في دروسهم، إنّ الطلبة الجدد الذين يختارون دراسة الطب يأتون من الثانويات حيث لغة التدريس في كل المواد هي اللغة العربية، لكن عليهم بالإتقان في اللغة الفرنسية للنجاح في علوم الطب. فيتربّ على ذلك نقص في مستوى التحصيل خلال الدروس والمحاضرات، ويشعر الطالب بعدم الثقة بالنفس والنتيجة الحتمية هي تدني المستوى بصفة عامة. إنّ هذا البحث بيّن أنه بالرغم من المواقف الإيجابية تجاه اللغة الفرنسية، إلا أنّ العديد من الطلبة لديهم رغبة قوية أن تكون اللغة العربية الفصحى هي لغة التدريس، وأما طلبة العلوم الإسلامية فمنهم من لديه مواقف إيجابية بالنسبة لتعلّم الفرنسية كلغة أجنبية، ولكنّ المواقف سلبية فيما يخص استعمال لغة أجنبية في التدريس الجامعي .

1. Introduction

Although Algeria's national and official language is Standard Arabic, which seems to reflect a simple situation, the Algerian sociolinguistic reality is much more complicated than that with the existence of different Arabic dialects resulting in the well-known diglossic relation, Berber varieties in a number of localized areas, and French of course, the language of colonial legacy, a language that persists and pervades the whole society to various degrees.

One major aim of this research work is to verify if, as commonly accepted in the Algerian context, French is more dominant in scientific fields, and Arabic is more related to religious matters. Even though this might seem evident, we would like to uncover the reasons for that and to explore the code choices related to such different linguistic domains as religion and science in everyday life. In doing so, we will work on the comparison of two distinct university contexts in Tlemcen, the Faculty of Medicine and the Department of Islamic Sciences, as we expect to find differences in the use of Arabic and French, on the one hand, and students' attitudes towards the two languages, on the other. Such differences reflect some interesting features of bilingualism that are found in the larger part of the community.

We attempt to show that, on the one hand, Arabic is usually associated with religion as it is the language of the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, and on the other, French, considered as the language of the colonizer, has also been linked historically to science and modernity. In order to achieve this task we will attempt to answer the following questions:

- a. Why do students in the two settings behave differently in their use of Arabic and French? What are the reasons behind their linguistic behaviour?
- b. Are students' attitudes towards the two languages responsible for their linguistic behaviour?

With the aim of investigating such questions, we put forward the following hypotheses:

- 1. Though the two student groups under investigation share similar socio-cultural and educational backgrounds, linguistically, they appear to behave differently: because the lectures in the Islamic studies department are given in Arabic, the students there tend to use that language to a large extent, particularly in its higher form, while the students of medicine seem to favour French, the language of their studies, even outside the university setting.
- 2. We hypothesize that such linguistic behaviour results from the students' attitudes towards each language; positive attitudes lead to the acceptance and adoption of a given language, while a negative consideration of a language consciously or unconsciously leads to its rejection or neglect at least.

2. The Algerian linguistic setting

Today's linguistic situation in Algeria is the consequence of successive periods of its long history, on the one hand, and various political and social factors on the other. Algeria has indeed gone through so many events that have shaped its cultural and linguistic components resulting in a very complex situation. But two important events have played a crucially definite role in its linguistic shaping: the introduction of Arabic started in the 7th century, and the establishment of French about twelve centuries later following a long-term occupation. Dendane, Z. (2007:68) argues that

...the impact of the French language and its culture was so powerful that it started to reflect in many Algerians' speech and soon led to a sort of dual identity. The influence resulted in the usual linguistic phenomena that occur when two or more languages get in contact: the use of bilingualism and consequent code-switching, code-mixing and borrowing pervading the mother tongue...

Therefore, the presence of French constitutes an important component of today's Algerian linguistic landscape, a language associated with more than a century of colonization and the policy that France undertook to eradicate the Arabic language in favour of the slogan 'l'Algérie française'. Indeed, very shortly after the occupation, the decision was to introduce the French educational system in Algeria, first for the colonists' children and then much later for some Algerians. The implementation of the French School left a deep linguistic impact on the Algerian society, and the repercussion was clearly felt in newly-independent Algeria and, half a century later, French is still strongly present on the Algerian linguistic scene. But in spite of this strong presence, we believe that the language policy in Algeria has been established implicitly, and this is precisely the nature of language decisions in the Arab world, taken on the basis that Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, the sacred book of Islam. Thus, it is the so-called modern form of Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which was to become the official language of Algeria, the one used in all other Arab countries.

However, even if the national and official language is MSA, Algeria is recognized as a bilingual country as French is used to various extents from everyday life situations – where a great number of French words and expressions are mixed with the dialects – to high-level political or cultural domains. French is present everywhere, in the public sectors and administration, in a number of radio and TV programmes, in newspapers, advertising, literature, and of course, sciences at the university.

As a matter of fact, one objective of the French, in addition to the colonisation of the land, was to establish institutions that sought to marginalise the Arabic language and to impose French as the official language in Algeria, and of course the language of education. The point that is of concern to us here is that even after independence, French continued to be used in most scientific fields and, up to now, despite the efforts of Arabisation, the impact of the colonial language on the various scientific fields is still strong.

3. Arabisation and the Algerian Education System

After the long period of colonization, Algeria wanted to re-establish its identity, but the newly- free country was faced with a dilemma as to the choice of the national language that was going to represent it and to be used in its administration. There are a number of obvious reasons that led to the choice of Arabic: because Classical Arabic in its modern form, MSA is highly codified, written and used for centuries before colonization as a language of refined literature and sciences, because it had been the only language of the Algerian government, administration and education before 1830, and finally because it was the current prestigious language in all other Arab countries due to its tight relation to Islam, it was then thought to be the only language to be chosen as the national and official language of independent Algeria.

Beside the fact that Arabic is highly codified, all these reasons make it very strong which may explain why it resisted colonization. This was not the case for other newly-independent countries that have seen their native tongues replaced by the colonizers' languages in various government institutions, as for instance in the case of French in Senegal and English in Nigeria.

In the rest of the Maghreb, Morocco and Tunisia, the same policy was undertaken right after the colonial period; that is, the urgent 'return' to Arabic and its consideration as the only official language, on the one hand, and the carrying out of the re-arabisation process, on the other. The feeling of belonging to the pan-Arab nation and the tight relation between Arabic and Islam is clearly stated in the first constitutions of Algeria: "Islam is the religion of the State" ; "Arabic is the national and official language" (1963; 1976...).

Thus, soon after independence, a program of Arabisation was declared by President Ben Bella and successive presidents to arabise the national institutions starting

with the educational system and the administration. It consisted in a slow introduction of Arabic first in the primary school, then progressively at higher levels. However, up to the 1970s, all subjects continued to be taught in French, given the lack of proficient teachers in Arabic. Then, with the help of teachers from Egypt, then Syria, more subjects were taught in Arabic. The next step was taken in the 1980s when Arabic was integrated in some subjects in secondary school. Later on, in the 1990s, it was completely part of the educational system and later at universities for human sciences and social sciences.

It should be pointed out here that scientific fields like mathematics, physics, biology and medicine are still taught in French at the university. Perhaps it is worth noting that those who mastered French very well in the past usually chose to study medical sciences and the use of French was always associated with higher-status members of the society. The situation has changed since, but we want to verify in our work if this relation of medicine students with French still affects today's students, while Islamic studies are strongly associated with Classical Arabic. Indeed, one aim of this research is to attempt to elicit students' attitudes towards the two languages.

4. The investigation

Sociolinguistic fieldwork is not an easy matter, in particular when we want informants to remain spontaneous in their linguistic behaviour. In fact, it is very hard to obtain natural speech when respondents are in an interview setting or answering a questionnaire. Such issue has been labeled 'the observers' paradox' by Labov (1972), a pioneer in sociolinguistic variation research who asserts that "...the aim of linguistic research in the community must be to find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation." (Labov 1972: 209) . A number of research instruments have been used in this work to attempt to describe the students' linguistic behaviour in the two university settings, Medicine (Med) and Islamic Sciences (ISc) and to elicit their attitudes towards the two languages.

4.1 Participant Observation

Not aware of the researcher's presence, the students in the two settings were observed in unconstrained situations, while we were taking notes about their utterances. 'Participant

observation' was also used, through what is called a friend-of-a-friend technique, with the help of a cousin who is a student in the Islamic department and a friend in the Medicine Faculty. This technique has allowed us to obtain natural data, once the students got used to my presence.

- ISc Students

We could observe that some ISc students tend to avoid using French in everyday speech, and do their best to use expressions and words from MSA. They seem to exhibit some linguistic behaviour which is specific to them. They favour the use of MSA in the form of specific utterances, not usually used by other speakers. One example is *حياتك الله* [hajja:kalla:h], simply to mean 'Hello', an expression tightly related to religion and to Arabic, often replacing the usual *السلام عليكم* [ʔassalæmu ʧalajkum]. Such behaviour seems to be used as a strategy by these students to distinguish themselves from others. We have also noticed the frequent use of MSA words and expressions related to their studies but mixed with AA in their everyday speech, e.g. *كانو دارو مقالة على التفسير*. 'They had 'done' an article about the interpretation (of the Qur'an)'. When speaking this way they identify and signal themselves as belonging to a specific group with a specific language behaviour mainly based on identifying the standard form of Arabic with religion. Instead of the common French borrowings like 'cours' or 'anglais' and 'simana' (respectively, 'lecture', 'English' and 'week'), it appears that they prefer using MSA borrowings. Such behaviour seems to settle as a habit among these speakers, through which they signal their belonging to a community of practice that is very different from Francophones in Algeria, but also from most people in Algeria on whom we can still feel the effect of the long-term French colonisation illustrated in the 'normal' use of French in everyday speech in the form of borrowings, but also in AA/French code-switching.

- Med Students

In contrast, we are more likely to find a different type of speech patterns among students of medicine. It is clear that, due to the language of study which deeply influences and shapes the students' behaviour, their discussions vary from those we have observed in the department of Islamic sciences. Just as ISc students have a specific repertoire of words and expression in MSA, Med students display a speech that is so

different, full of code-switching, mainly when medical topics are discussed but also in their everyday conversation.

Beside the repertoire which can shape the nature of language, we have observed in Med students' linguistic behaviour more acceptability and feeling of ease when it comes to using French, a behaviour not so much found among ISc students. This can appear in switchings like *Salut, ça va?*, or *C'est de nos droits qu'on parle!*, sentences which are not necessarily related to the medical field but are more likely to be found in the Med students' speech than in that of ISc students. This shows the positive attitudes Med students have towards French. Therefore, we can say that different socio-cultural orientations, different registers and different attitudes towards languages can explain important differences in the language behaviour among the two investigated student groups.

4.2 The questionnaire

The analysis and interpretation of the data collected during our research come from 88 students in the two settings (39 Medicine + 49 Islamic Sciences). The data are mainly obtained from a questionnaire that has been administered to both groups with the aim of determining differences in their respective responses to the same questions which have provided answers to our main hypothesis, namely that students' language behaviour inside and outside the university setting is largely determined by their attitudes towards the two languages in competition.

The first three questions try to determine the students' knowledge about their own skills in both languages, those skills being understanding, speaking and reading. In the first question the students of each group were asked which language they speak better. Surprisingly, 74.35 % of the Medicine students affirm that they speak Standard Arabic better, while the rest, only 25.64%, say they speak French better.

Therefore, despite our hypothesis which associates French with medicine, the data show that MSA is largely spoken better, and this is obviously due to the nature of the Algerian education system in which all the studies are in MSA before university while scientific fields are taught in French at the university level. As to those who state they speak French better, they are probably encouraged by their parents who wish their off-

spring to become doctors, and thus are likely to have higher motivation for learning French.

Such language mismatch is indeed a problem for so many students who struggle to have an acceptable level in their studies. In the questionnaire, we gave the students a question to check if actually they suffer from the language in which they study.

However, our hypothesis that each language is associated with a type of studies is once again reaffirmed when the data obtained in the two departments are compared, giving 100% of ISc who clearly and unanimously assert that it is Arabic they speak better. This shows, as pointed out before, that even if the two studied groups belong to the same Algerian speech community, they exhibit some important differences. In the department of Islamic sciences, it is Arabic which is spoken better for all the informants, while at least 25% of the Med students claim they speak French better.

The questionnaire was administered to the two groups in order to determine their respective skills in both languages and the attitudes they have for each. Apart from two open-ended questions, the aim of which being to get views about students who master Arabic (al fuṣḥā) and French, the rest of the questionnaire is in the form of close-ended questions, with a choice to make among a number of propositions, such as their preferences in using French or Arabic in given contexts or mixing them.

Here's a table and then a graph showing the students' competence in speaking MSA:

Qu. 1: Which language do you speak better?

	MSA	French
Med N=39	29	10
ISc N=49	49	0

Table 3.1 The speaking skill in MSA vs. French

The graph below clearly shows the differences in students' beliefs as to their own speaking skill in MSA vs. French.

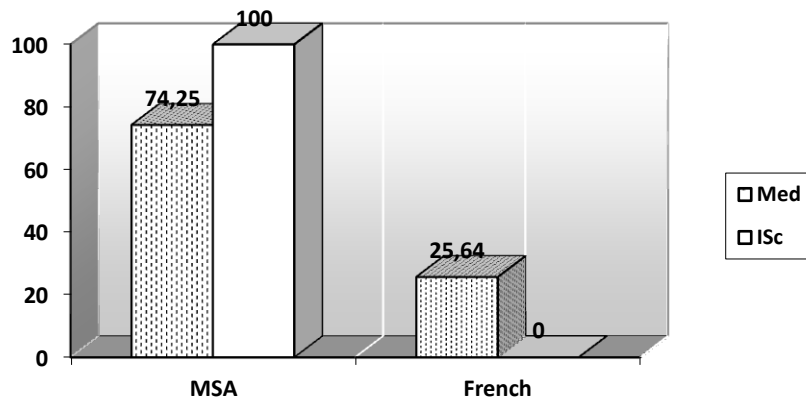


Fig. 3.1 The speaking skill in MSA vs. French

Similar results are obtained for the second question: ‘Which language do you understand better?’. As many as 71.78% of the Med respondents say they understand Arabic better than French, while the rest (28.21%) say the opposite. On the other hand, all 100% of the ISc students affirm they understand Arabic better, as shown below.

	MSA	French
Med N=39	28	11
ISc N=49	49	0

Table 3.2 The speaking skill in MSA vs. French

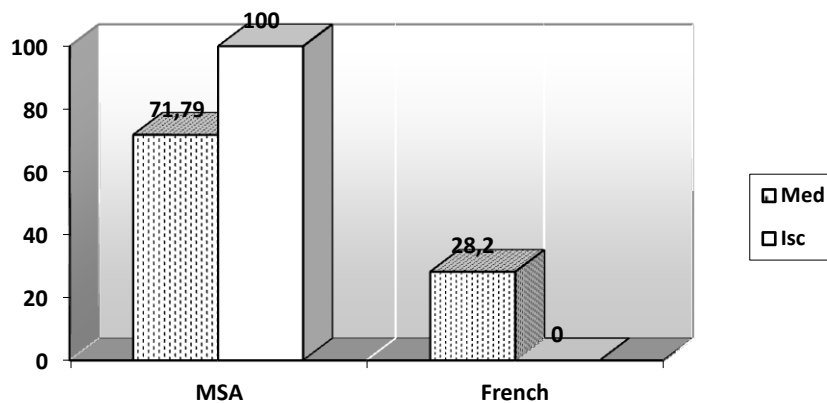


Fig. 3.2 The understanding skill in MSA vs. French

As expected, MSA is understood better than French when we consider all of the 88 respondents, i.e. 87.5%. This is clearly due to the fact that MSA is the language of instruction at all levels of pre-university education while French is taught just as a

language subject. However, at first sight, it is unexpected that 28% of the Med students understand French better, and on the other hand no student from the Islamic department has claimed to understand French better. This can only be explained in that their respective linguistic behaviour is related to the domain of use and consequently to the attitudes and motivations they have toward the two languages.

So, on the whole, what confirms our hypothesis to a large extent is that the ISc students are more proficient in MSA, the language of their studies, while the Med students aspire to have sufficient proficiency in French. Such facts about the complexities of language show how various factors are intertwined, which makes the explanations difficult.

Hoffman (1999:6-7) says in this respect:

Language behaviour is highly complex, and no one academic subject alone can hope to explain it completely. Linguistic performance is influenced by emotional factors, by the speakers linguistic knowledge, and by perceived social values and norms.

4.3. Language Use and Preferences

In another question, the students were asked in which language they preferred to watch different programs on TV and which they generally used while ‘surfing’ on the web. We have intentionally chosen these activities as they are not necessarily related to their studies in order to show that their different linguistic behaviour is related to other factors. The results are shown on the charts below:

– ISc:

	Movies	News	Programs	Docs	Internet
Arabic	23	42	40	35	31
French	9	2	1	5	10
Both	5	4	7	8	5
No answer	12	1	1	1	3

Table 3.4 Language preference in watching TV and using internet among ISc students.

The graph represents clearly the results obtained:

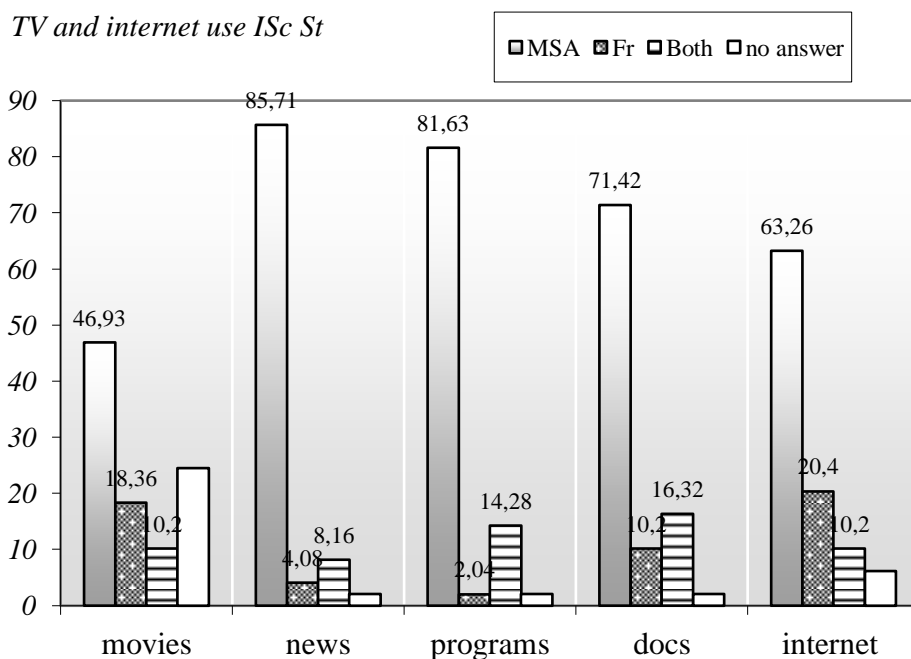


Fig. 3.4. ISc Language choice in TV and Internet use

The difference in the use of MSA vs. French appears clearly when we consider the respondents from the Faculty of Medicine:

- Med:

	Movies	News	Programs	Docs	Internet
Arabic	16	23	19	18	8
French	17	14	14	17	29
Both	6	2	6	4	2

Table 3.5 Language preference in watching TV and using the Internet among Med students

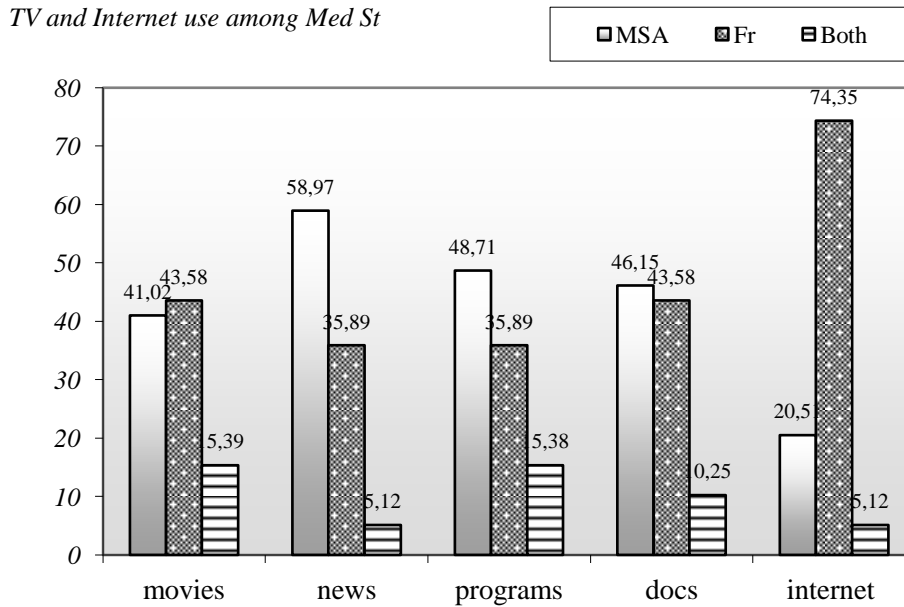


Fig. 3.5 Med Language choice in TV and Internet use

The most salient fact that can be drawn when observing the two graphs is the excessive presence of Arabic among students' choice in the Islamic department in watching TV and exploring the net, whereas the more balanced presence of Arabic and French among medicine students suggests that the two groups may be said to belong to different communities of practice (Eckert 2000) on the basis of language choice. We believe that Eckert's definition of 'communities of practice' fits our two groups of students in relation to the degree of Arabic and French use and their attitudes towards the two languages, though they belong to the same speech community. Here's one characterization of a 'community of practice' that Eckert (2000:13) puts forward:

A community of practice is an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in some common endeavor. Ways of doing things, ways of talking, beliefs, values, power relations - in short, practices - emerge in the course of their joint activity around that endeavor. A community of practice is different as a social construct from the traditional notion of community

We might well consider then that our informants have chosen to study either medicine or Islamic sciences on the basis of the value they give to the language of their studies, among other incentives of course, and such a choice leads to a distinct linguistic behaviour, not only in university settings but also in everyday practices.

A few questions arise: Since news, movies, docs, etc. are available to both groups in Arabic and French, why are there many more students in medicine who prefer to do those activities in French than there are in the department of Islamic sciences? Do these motivations have an impact on language use? Are those motivations telling us something about their different conceptions of the two languages? Do they see Arabic and French the same way? Are different attitudes toward the two languages responsible for the different choices we can witness?

In fact the data presented above show that we can find more students in the department of Islamic studies that have a positive attitude toward Arabic than with the Med students, whose opinions are more balanced. This can be partly due to the different levels of skills they have shown in the first questions, but most importantly, as already mentioned many times, to attitudes towards a language.

It is also worth noting that girls in the two settings are more in favour of French, though to different extents when we compare Med girls' results to those of ISc girls. Also, for some religious reasons some of the ISc respondents say they do not watch movies, and this may be a hint to identify the two groups as having different cultural/educational backgrounds and/or motivations, which obviously affect their respective language use and preferences.

5. Attitudes towards MSA and French

One central reason for contrasting MSA with French in this research work is that the two languages enjoy high status in the Algerian society, though on different grounds:

- MSA is tightly related to the High variety known as Classical Arabic, the language of the Qur'an and thus revered by all Arabs and Muslims throughout the world; its long-established status as the language of sciences for many centuries before the advent of colonialism has also given it a high degree of prestige.

- French too is regarded as a prestigious language for its association with the modern world, sciences and technology, business, economy and international communication. However, the French colonial policy of total denigration of the Algerian people's language and culture has never been forgotten, and some consider

today's language problems, particularly in the education system, as resulting from the policy of French oppression. Bourhis (1982:44)ii writes in this respect:

To this day the influence of the French language and culture has been so enormous in North Africa that language reform in favour of Arabic has had to proceed very gradually through a phase of French/Arab bilingualism

One important outcome of such co-existence of two prestigious languages in the Algerian society and the persistent bilingualism lies in the contrasting and sometimes conflicting attitudes towards these languages. We want to insist here on these differences in attitudes among subjects belonging to the young generation whose reactions toward each language are certainly responsible for a number of stereotypes. There seems to be a kind of competition between the two languages and the speakers' perception of each.

The open-ended question 'How do you consider the student who speaks French / Arabic (al fuṣḥā) very well?' is analyzed both quantitatively, i.e. by counting the number of positive and negative answers each student gave on a speaker's proficiency, and qualitatively by analyzing what they actually said.

The contrasted quantitative results are presented in the following tables and graphs:

- Med: N=39

- ISc: N=49

	Posit ive	Neu tral	Neg ative	Posit ive	Ne utr al	Neg ative
MS A	20	13	6	43	6	0
Fre nch	26	10	3	32	9	8

Table 4.1 Attitudes towards good speakers of MSA and French

The two tables provide the students' answers on how they consider a proficient speaker in French, then in MSA. Each answer is classified as 'positive', 'neutral' or 'negative' according to what the respondent writes; an answer that illustrates the

necessity of knowing languages is considered positive; those which mention the speaker's arrogance (French) or backwardness (MSA), for instance, are seen as negative. Neutral answers are those that reveal no emotional feeling from the part of the respondent, as in those who gave 'It's normal' as an answer.

In the form of percentage, these results are represented in the two graphs shown below:

a - Med: N=39

b - ISc: N=49

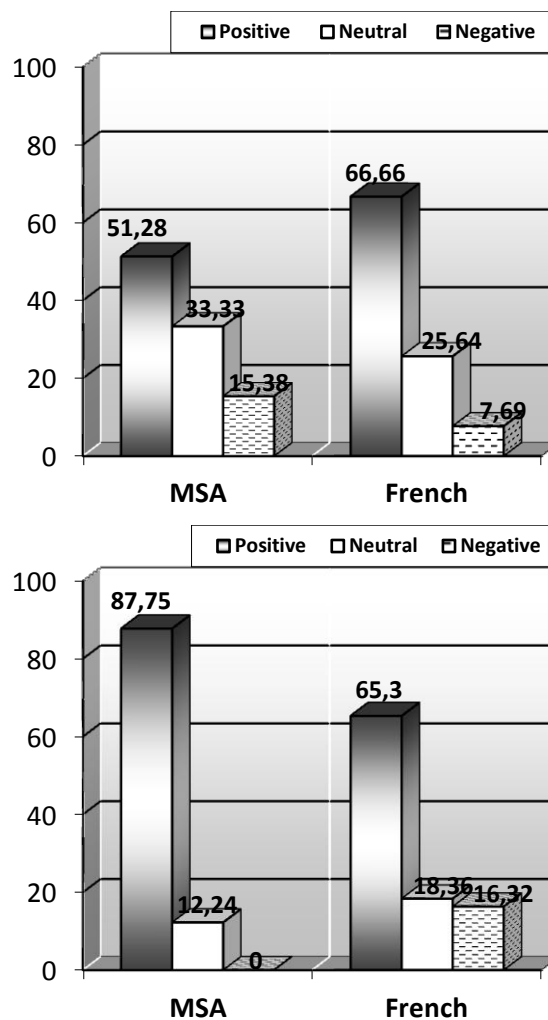


Fig. 4.1 Attitudes towards good speakers of MSA and French

As expected, the bars show that the Med students display more positive attitudes towards good speakers of French, because, for them, French is the language that will lead to success in their studies. However, we can see that the bar concerning positive

attitudes towards MSA is quite high too. This is due to the fact that people in a general manner share a similar point of view about Arabic, the language of religion and identity, culture and traditional literature.

The ISc students, on the other hand, give a much higher value to good MSA speakers than Med students (almost 88% vs. 51%). Again, this is understandable when we consider the importance given by students of Islamic Law to Arabic being the language of the Qur'an, and hence the high prestige associated with it. In fact, what is not explainable lies in the few respondents who gave a rather neutral view (12%) on proficient users of MSA. No students showed a negative attitude, though.

But what is of interest to us here lies in the small differences we can encounter in the respondents' answers; approximately the same number of students in the two groups show a positive attitude towards French (about 66% vs. 65%) while we were expecting a much higher percentage among the Med students, and perhaps a much lower one among the ISc students. Another remarkable outcome is the small but significant proportion of Med respondents who see a good speaker of French negatively (7%), while in contrast, no ISc student displays negative attitude to good MSA speakers.

The quantitative analysis can give us just an idea about the degree of 'positivity' or 'negativity' found in each group, not what type of attitudes and ideas the students have on the users of the two languages. It is the qualitative analysis that can show us the real core of their thoughts. This is indeed helpful for us in linking attitudes and language use as well as skills. Johnstone (2000:37) asserts that

The analysis phase of sociolinguistic research is often quantitative as well as qualitative. This means that analyzing sociolinguistic data often involves some counting, explicit or implicit, in order to answer questions about how often things happen, in addition to the descriptions that help answer qualitative questions about how and why things happen.

Our investigation has not only shown that students' motivation to become more proficient in one or the other language plays an important role in their linguistic behaviour, but also insist on the fact that their attitudes toward the two languages and toward the users of these languages make up the most significant factor that seems to determine their language choice and to enhance their linguistic skills.

6. Conclusion

The overall aim of this article has been to draw the attention to one feature that is part of the linguistic situation in Algeria: the Arabic/French contrast. From all the recurrent linguistic domains in the Algerian society, which vary from everyday life to education, to cultural domains and media, and are crucially responsible for language choice and code-switching, we have chosen to investigate the two domains, religion and sciences, and how these domains affect students' language choice, hoping this can illustrate an important aspect of Algerian bilingualism.

The objective is to show that in two university settings, Medicine and Islamic sciences, it is easy to observe speakers with different language behaviours resulting mostly from their attitudes towards the two competing and prestigious languages, MSA and French.

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