

Le Français en Algérie: Seconde langue ou langue étrangère

BENMOUSSAT Smail

Dpt des langues étrangères.

Faculté des lettres,

et sciences humaines et sociales.

Université de Tlemcen.

Résumé

La présente réflexion porte sur le statut de la langue française en Algérie. Si le discours politique accorde à la langue française un statut purement de langue étrangère, la situation socio-linguistique fait place à la notion de bilinguisme. La politique d'arabisation de l'enseignement et de l'administration n'a, cependant, pas récolté les résultats escomptés. Cette politique était plutôt centrée sur un but précis.

Prior to Algeria's independence in 1962, the French language was widely used by virtue of the fact that the country was under French rule. Hence the French language has been the language of the educated élite. Here the term élite, as used in this section, refers to the offspring of the French School. Yet two conflicting views exist in analyzing the linguistic situation in Algeria. One held by the politicians, is that Arabic is the national and official language of the country and French is a foreign language (status planning). In other terms, the political view claims that Algeria is a monolingual nation, while the linguistic view considers Algeria a bilingual country; some others take this step further when they assert that Algeria is a multilingual country. This assertion is made on the basis that there exists in Algeria another indigenous speech variety: *Tamazight* spoken in 'Kabylia' (mountainous coastal region in Algeria stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the southern slope of the Grande Kabylie Mountains) and other scattered areas throughout the country.

Yet the language decisions are made on the basis of nationalism rather than nationism, and besides the educational objectives of the Algerian School, the curriculum as a whole, has been moulded to inculcate and engender feelings of nationalism. This policy started with the implementation of the Arabization process and overtly reinforced by the Algerianization of the teaching staff and a few years later by the Foundation School.

Arabization has long figured in the agendas of the different political structures to restore the national cultural values and the Arabo-Islamic identity. One of the major decisions that Algeria undertook in 1962 in terms of language planning was the promulgation of Classical Arabic as the national language of the country. Yet, the question of what language to use as the medium of instruction in Algerian schools was one of the major decisions in language-in-



education planning. As Hartshone points out:

Language policies are highly charged political issues and seldom if ever decided on educational grounds alone... this is particularly true of the experience of bilingual and multilingual countries, where decisions on language in education have to do with issues of political dominance, the protection of the power structure, the preservation of privilege

(Hartshone 1987:63)

Although President Benbella's (1962-1965) famous speech on October 5th, 1962 in which he announced that, '*Arabic is the national language of independent Algeria*', he considered the French language as a necessary tool for the acquisition of modern techniques. In the same vein, Ahmed Taleb El Ibrahimi, a former minister of Education and one of the leading proponents of the Arabization policy, viewed Arabic as the appropriation of the Algerian soul and the French language as a window open on the world.

In order for a language to be used effectively as a medium of instruction (acquisition planning, i.e. the strategy to increase the use and users of a language through language teaching), the following conditions are necessary:

1. The language must have an accepted writing system.
2. Basic teaching and reading material must be available in the language.
3. There must be teachers who can speak, read and write it.

However, as regards the Arabic language in Algeria, only the first requirement could be met in 1962; Arabic underwent the lengthy process of standardization in the 8th and 9th centuries AD. This produced a well-defined set of norms that the early Arab grammarian called *fusha* (eloquent in English). These early language planning measures helped define the rules of the Arabic language. The second one was completed by the Lebanese house of publication (Dar Ennashr Lilkiteb). A note of caution is in order here regarding the teaching material. The imported textbooks reflected a socio-cultural context highly different from the local one. As for the third requirement, the Ministry of Education had recourse to the Egyptian government. In 1964 1000 Egyptian teachers were sent to teach Arabic in primary schools though some of them were probably greengrocers; the same number of Syrian teachers was sent in 1967 to pursue the mission of Arabization

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the promotion of a language as the language of wider communication provides a certain degree of linguistic homogeneity which, in turn, allows for quicker and better communication. These two outcomes can be considered as noble aims, only if a society wishes to allow equal access to economic and political power to all of its citizens. In

Algeria, however, the promotion of language-in-education policy through the large-scale Arabization process has not been carried out with great seriousness of intent and commitment. The plain purpose of this policy was to discard and marginalize the Francophone élite, and to aid in the eradication of minority languages, not least *Tamazight* spoken by one fifth of the population (representing some 6.5 million in four main groups: the Kabyles, the Shawiya, the Mzabis and the Tuaregs).

The likely outcome of such a 'linguistic cleansing' has monolingual and monocultural agendas. Psychologically speaking, the precipitate valuation of Arabic vis-à-vis French and the other local varieties created a situation which can be described in terms of linguistic imperialism. Here the notion of imperialism is similar to that of Phillipson 1992, but one might argue that Phillipson's terminology is slightly patronizing.

Language planning policies are attempts to solve conflicts over language varieties and communication problems, not causing linguistic hegemony. Needless to say, in Algeria, linguistic hegemony was achieved partly through linguistic norms and usage –lack of the standardization attribute (Stewart 1962, 1968; Hymes 1971) in the popular vernaculars and mostly through coercion (Law 91/05 issued on January 16th, 1991 regulating the general use of Arabic revived in July 1998).

Arguably, one of the major benefits of language planning is by promoting the use of a particular language, it can foster a sense of national consciousness, thus reinforcing the political unity of the country. Paradoxically, in Algeria the promotion of Arabic as the national and official language has undermined rather than strengthened political unity. Thus, the government policy of promoting a national identity through its Arabization process has not resulted in political unity, but engendered great hostility among some members of the society. This also shows the complex relationship between language planning, nationalism and political unity.

From 1971 onwards Arabic replaced French as the medium of instruction in primary schools; by 1976 all Middle-school education was conducted in Arabic; by 1984 all Secondary education, and by 1986 most university education had undergone this change. This policy of acquisition planning has received a cold welcome from the Francophones, who have previously enjoyed privilege and high status –*the cream of the crop*-, felt threatened by the newly mobilized language (Classical Arabic). Fearing the loss of their position, the élite views that the acquisition of French as '*un butin de guerre*' –a war booty, to use Kateb Yacine's (an Algerian writer) famous terms, therefore a treasured possession, as well as a key to economic betterment and modernization, intellectual pursuits and progressive values, and personal development, hence a compromise for some time to come.

The friction caused by the use of Arabic in schools and some public sectors has made language policy a very sensitive issue. These changes in language policy have systematically affected the role and status of French in Algeria. Consequently, the use of Arabic as a language of wider communication is on the increase. Similarly in the public sector, since all the official documents must be written in Arabic, the use of French is on the wane. In short then, the policy of favouring Arabic, explicitly, has devalued the French language, and to a lesser extent, the other indigenous languages.

However, the value of the French language as an important international language has continued to be recognized. French is to be kept as a second language. But the term "second language" as used to refer to French in the Algerian context has to be qualified, as it does not refer to a second language in the true linguistic sense. Instead the term is used to mean that French is second to Arabic in importance for official purposes. It is in keeping with this policy of maintaining French as a "second language" that it is still taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary education.

Attitudes towards French in a country like Algeria can differ greatly depending on the ethnic and linguistic background of the individual. Among those who support the promotion of Arabic as a sign of allegiance and a way of achieving a unique national identity, like the Arabophones, the use of French may be viewed as a sign of disloyalty to the mainstream political discourse and an impediment to the building of the sense of nationalism. On the other hand, among those who do not identify with the major ethnic groups, as is the case with many of the Kabylis, French may be valued as promoting a neutral medium of instruction in schools and in administration. However, it is a common perception among some Algerians that the substitution of the French language by Arabic as the medium of instruction has led to falling educational standards.

Because of the country's hurtful experience of French colonization, the educational authorities have always been extremely cautious vis-à-vis language policies. The French language, though officially regarded as a foreign language, still fulfils the instrumental function in many higher education institutions and some activities of the regulative function. However, this imposed language is thought to have clouded the issue, adding complexity to a sociolinguistic situation characterized by a diglossic situation - Classical Arabic and Algerian dialectal Arabic - in addition to the emergence of *Tamazight* as a 'second national' language.

In conclusion, it is evident that the overall goals of learning a language, be second or foreign, are to increase self-awareness and cross-cultural understanding which, in turn help to promote international understanding and ultimately develop the sense of tolerance vis-à-vis others' differences. This

being one of the most idealistic aims of second/foreign language learning. Yet this idealistic philosophy cannot be attained and maintained without first and foremost a transformation of the linguistic barriers into linguistic bridges.

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