

Enquiring the Linguistic Landscape of an Algerian Working-class Area: the Case of Sidi El Houari District

Analyse du Paysage Linguistique d'un Quartier Populaire Algérien : le Cas de Sidi El Houari

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Abstract

Nowadays, enquiring the languages appearing in a particular public space has become of gigantic importance. It has piqued the attention of a host of academics from all over the world. In sociolinguistics, linguistic landscape analysis is an area of research which is primarily concerned with language policy. Hence, the present work is an attempt to investigate these two intertwined notions. In fact, it spotlights Sidi El Houari district because of the high stature it has in the city of Oran. It is considered as a historical and popular neighbourhood. This paper aims to uncover the similarities and differences between public and private signs in terms of language use. Yet, it provides an insight into the local authorities' language policy and individual practices as well, i.e. the codes that shop owners and restaurant proprietors display on their façades so as to attract diverse passers-by and customers.

Keywords: Language use - Linguistic Landscape - Algeria – Working-class area - Sidi El Houari.

Résumé

De nos jours, examiner les langues qui apparaissent dans un espace public particulier est devenu d'une importance gigantesque. Ce genre d'étude a attiré l'attention de nombreux intellectuels dans le monde entier. En sociolinguistique, ce domaine d'étude est essentiellement lié à la politique linguistique. En fait, ce travail est une tentative d'examiner ces deux concepts qui sont imbriqués. Il met en lumière le quartier de Sidi El Houari en raison de la grande stature qu'il a dans la ville d'Oran. Il est considéré comme une région populaire et historique. Cet article vise à découvrir les similitudes et les différences entre les enseignes publics et privés en termes d'usage de la langue. Il donne un aperçu de la politique linguistique appliquée par les autorités locales et des pratiques individuelles, c'est-à-dire les langues que les commerçants et les restaurateurs affichent sur leurs façades afin d'attirer divers passants et clients.

Mots-clés: L'usage de la langue - Paysage linguistique - Algérie - Quartier populaire - Sidi El Houari.

Introduction

Linguistic landscape analysis is a growing field in sociolinguistics. What has prompted a number of scholars to investigate such a research area is the gigantic importance it has. Signs can be found almost everywhere. They are designed by diverse individuals in order to communicate some information and to transmit particular messages. Besides, they are issued for the purpose of recognizing and identifying diverse spaces and localities. The languages appearing on those signboards are not chosen at random and thus should not be taken for granted. For some reason, they are used by either governmental institutions or different individuals owning shops and restaurants. That is, both top-down and bottom-up signs can be found in every linguistic landscape to convey information and to promote particular symbolic and cultural values. These two types of signage are sometimes incompatible in terms of language use. This means that, in some cases, public signs show certain codes while private ones display other language preferences and even whims. In *Sidi El Houari* district, governmental institutions focus most of the time on the use of Modern Standard Arabic and French while, besides these two codes, individual practices show other tongues such as English and some Spanish letterings though they are not prevailing. Interestingly enough, the reason lying behind this particular language use is history as well as globalization. Nowadays, people learn about others languages and cultures and start using them owing to the quick progress in both technological and scientific fields.

1- Linguistic Landscape: A definition

Linguistic landscape (henceforth LL) is a concept that has been referred to by a number of authors such as Landry and Bourhis (1997) who argue that it is the language(s) that one may find in a given public space. That is, this points to the letterings which publicly surround people outdoors. This may include any word, phrase or text being exhibited in the public sphere. In fact, these texts provide people with important information and the languages in which they are written may have a significant symbolic role in a certain area. These two authors assert that there are two distinct types of signs, viz. private and governmental ones. Examples of private signage comprise those non-official items referring to names of shops and restaurants as well as food advertisements, whereas names of streets or schools, and the various texts that may be found on governmental institutions' fronts such as hospitals constitute instances of official signage. It is noteworthy that signs and banners play an important role within society as they provide people with essential pieces of information that they need. That is, they are used to transmit interesting messages. Furthermore, LL typically serves as a symbol

representing some languages and denoting their significance and status vis-à-vis other ones. At times, the two aforementioned types of signs intersect and meet each other as they appear side by side within a given public space. In this sense, Landry and Bourhis (1997) discuss instances where they occur together by claiming that:

“In some cases, the language profile of private signs and government signs may be quite similar and thus contribute to a consistent and coherent linguistic landscape. There are instances, however, in which the language of private signs is quite discordant with the language profile of government signs. More often than not, there is greater language diversity in private than in government signs.” (1997, p: 27)

What Landry and Bourhis (1997) seek to explain is that sometimes the languages displayed on non-official signs may be congruent with those issued by the government. Yet, this indicates that shop/business owners are satisfied with the languages emphasised by the authorities. It means that they consider those languages to be comprehensible and effective in communicating messages and addressing customers in such a place. Notwithstanding this fact, there are other examples where official signs show certain tongues, whereas private ones exhibit other divergent ones. Thus, this delineates the fact that the two language profiles within this specific linguistic landscape are not in agreement. In short, LL is seen as an arena where various languages appear in a written form and compete with one another. They may either be issued by the authorities or by ordinary people. Then, it is momentous to investigate the presence or the absence of some languages in different sceneries as it helps one to be acquainted with the linguistic profile of diverse regions.

2- Algeria's Linguistic Profile

The linguistic situation of Algeria is considered as a complex one due to its long colonial history. It is characterised by its Arabic diglossic situation, the coexistence of a variety of languages, of which two mother-tongues, namely Arabic and Berber with its regional dialectal varieties as well as a foreign language, vis. French. From the vantage point of a number of Algerian linguists (Morsly, D. 1991, Taleb-Ibrahimi, K. 1995, Miliani, M. 1997, Cherrad, Y. 1998), Algeria is a multilingual country where these languages coexist; compete against one another. Both Arabic and Berber are deemed as official and national languages while French is viewed as a main foreign tongue because of the colonial impact.

Along the same lines, Chachou (2013, p: 196) believes in the existence of stereotypical images tying classical Arabic to the Holy Qur'an, sacredness and the Arab identity. In addition, she confirms that Algerian Arabic refers to the variety utilised in daily informal communication and Berber is a language with regional dialects; it is employed among the Berber speech communities and reminds

Algerians of their origins. French, on the other hand, is viewed negatively and this is closely linked to the colonial period. Sometimes it is even associated with modernity because it appears in scientific domains (medical and technological studies), while continuing to be used for administrative purposes. Against such a background, the aforementioned languages have found a new competitor in a world language, English that has emerged in a number of domains because of globalization and other economic projects. This appears to be a bad news for Algeria's different national sectors, not least is the political sphere where opponent voices are calling for a new approach to ranking foreign languages.

3- Setting of Research

In the present paper, the major centre of attention is called *Sidi El Houari* district. It is spotlighted on the pretext that, in Oran, it is considered as a historical and popular neighbourhood which is known for its old-style buildings and valleys, ancient architecture, fortress and other important sites. These factors play a major role in attracting different people to visit this old place. It is worth mentioning that, research about linguistic landscapes can be carried out in neighbourhoods as it is illustrated by Huebner (2006) who stressed the importance of this kind of sites by focusing on Bangkok when he perceived the existence of “*separate and identifiable neighbourhoods, each with its own linguistic culture*” (Huebner, 2006, p: 32).

As far as *Sidi El Houari* is concerned, “la Scalera”, which is a Spanish word meaning staircase, and the fishery quarter are essentially investigated. Indeed, it is impossible to talk about this district without mentioning these two sites. They are considered to be of importance in the history of Oran as they hosted a large number of people, mainly of Spanish origins. Most of them used to live with Algerians in “patios”, i.e. big houses with a number of rooms adjoining one another, where different people dwell and share a common courtyard as well as a unique entrance. Some of them also used to work side by side with Algerians in the harbour and the fishery.

4- Theoretical Framework

For the purpose of investigating the linguistic landscape of *Sidi El Houari*, the researcher relied on photography of various types of signs, hoardings and display panels. Hence, this LL comprises diverse kinds of top-down and bottom-up signs, viz. monolingual, bilingual, hybrid and multilingual ones. They may be issued by either the local authorities or private shop owners. The total number of signs that has been captured in this particular region is 80, among them 60 are private items while 20 other ones belong to governmental institutions.

The difference between them is that the public sector is strongly controlled by the authorities whereas the private one is based on people’s perceptions, artistic tastes or likes. Yet, it is important to mention that by looking at these specific numbers, one may notice the predominant use of bottom-up signs in this particular public sphere in comparison with top-down items. Details about the number of signboards that have been photographed are displayed in table 1 below.

	The number of top-down signs	(%)	The number of bottom-up signs	(%)
Sidi El Houari	20		60	

Table 1: Top-down vs. bottom-up signs in Sidi El Houari district

In this research work, photography was focused on so as to capture as many images as possible of both top-down and bottom-up signs. Indeed, those pictures were taken while walking along the streets of *Sidi El Houari* district during a period of two weeks in October 2019 for the purpose of documenting these two sites’ LLs, analysing the various signboards and interpreting them. This made it easier for one to count those signs and then to primarily classify them according to the languages they display, their functions like street names, shop-signs and advertisings, for instance, and their types which can either be governmental or private, i.e. official or non-official signage.

5- Data Analysis and Discussion

The LL of *Sidi El Houari* district is made up of divergent languages. The signs that have been photographed are classified into three categories, namely monolingual, bilingual and hybrid ones. They will be displayed in details in the following section. Interestingly, no multilingual signage has been encountered there. Then, the different languages that are visible on those signs and billboards will be detailed in table 2 below.

	Monolingual signs	Bilingual signs	Hybrid signs
Top-down signs	MSA 5	MSA – French 15	
Bottom-up signs	MSA 8 French 25 English 5 Spanish 1	MSA – French 19	French – Spanish 1 French – English 1

Table 2: The languages displayed on top-down vs. bottom-up monolingual, bilingual and hybrid signs in Sidi El Houari district

In this area, the public space consists of a number of 46 (57 %) monolingual signboards. They manifest various codes, namely French, (58.69 %), MSA (28.26 %), English (10.87 %) and Spanish (2.17 %). Figure 1 below clarifies governmental institutions’ reliance on MSA as the sole language to be seen on signs in this particular district. This picture represents the “Algerian

Muslim Scouts' office" whose large signboard contains the Algerian flag on its right and the Algerian Muslim Scouts' logo on its left with the letterings "Be ready" and "Algeria" being written in MSA. This is considered as a sign of patriotism. In the middle of this signboard, different phrases are to be found, they read as follows: "the Algerian Muslim Scouts", "the province of Oran" and "Sidi El Houari group". As far as this monolingual sign is concerned, all the letterings are predominantly utilised in Arabic without exception since it is the language of Islam and the Holy Qur'an. In other words, MSA is considered to be an appropriate code that may represent this organisation since it is an Islamic one.



Figure 1. Algerian Muslim Scouts' sign

Besides, other individuals have chosen monolingual signs emphasising MSA for their shops due to the official status it has in Algeria. It is employed as it is thought to be understood by the majority of educated Algerians and since this is not a touristic area where strangers can be encountered. Indeed, this may help stimulating a large number of Algerians especially those living in this popular district. This form of Arabic is focused on by someone owning a fitness centre (see figure 2). In addition to the photo of a bodybuilder lifting a weight that is put at its entrance, he wrote the phrase "Heroes' Room" as well as the name "the Martyr Benaoum Ben Zarga", both of them occur in MSA. This code has been chosen to be put on this monolingual sign for many reasons. It is to make reference to the Arabic term "Shahid" which has appeared in the Holy Qur'an denoting "Martyr". In addition, the person whose name has been mentioned is an Algerian and an Arab man who used to strive against the colonial forces. Hence, in this case, Arabic may well reflect the Algerian and the Arab culture and identity.



Figure 2. Sign for fitness centre

The second language that has been noticed in this public sphere is French. Figure 3 below sheds light on an instance of a monolingual façade belonging to a hairdresser. Accordingly, various French texts appear on its shop window. These are “Salon de Coiffure Homme”, “Chez Aek”, “Soyez les bienvenus” and “fermé” meaning “Men’s Hairdressing salon”, “At Aek’s”, “Welcome!” and “Closed”, respectively. These are uncomplicated words that are used by the majority of Algerians especially the youth who are particularly targeted. That is, they are prevailing among Algerians. Thus, this hairstylist has given priority to this foreign language so as to reach a large number of customers and to look *à la mode* and stylish as well. It is thought to be understood and to attract a large number of youngsters.



Figure 3. Hairdresser’s façade

The next language that has been found in *Sidi El Houari* is English. Yet, “Family’s Pizza” is a name that is used by a pizza restaurant owner so as to draw people’s attention and to make his business prosper. Yet, this eating place has

been illustrated by figure 4 below. In this respect, English has been chosen being the first international language which is utilised in this globalised world that Oran is considered as part of. The terms occurring on those signs are even not complex; they are common words that a large number of Algerians can be familiar with.



Figure 4. Banner for restaurant

Interestingly enough, a single case of Spanish has importantly been found in *Sidi El Houari's* LL. In this sense, the word “Zapatos,” which refers to “Shoes” is mentioned on a men’s shoe shop sign (see figure 5 below). In fact, this appears clearly on its centre with the expression “Clasico & Deportivo” signifying “Classic and Sports”. This latter occurs in a little bit small size; however, it can be clearly read by anyone standing in front of this boutique. Therefore, this language use indicates that the Spanish language is a crucial part of this region and its identity.



Figure 5. Men’s shoe shop sign

Unlike other regions, *Sidi El Houari* is characterized by the presence of few hybrid signs. By considering the pictures captured in this specific site, one may notice that this category of signboards represents only 2.5 % of its linguistic landscape. Only two examples have been found; one of them is to be mentioned in this part. It is a restaurant where fish is served. Its name is “*Scalera Poisonnerie*” meaning “Staircase Fish Shop” (see figure 6 below). Here, in addition to the French language, there is the word “*Scalera*” that derives from the Spanish term “*Escalera*”. It is in fact the name of a popular place situated in this district where the Spanish people used to dwell. Yet, it stands for “staircase”. It is specifically

utilised to elucidate that this is an old neighbourhood that was influenced by the Spanish language and culture.



Figure 6. Fish shop's façade

By visiting *Sidi El Houari*, one may observe the clear-cut spread of bilingual signs issued by the local authorities and other diverse individuals owning various types of shops and restaurants. Yet, the two languages that are essentially focused on are MSA and French. In this sense, among the whole photos taken in this area, there is a total number of 15 (18.75%) bilingual signs. More importantly, all of them emphasise MSA-French bilingualism. This language configuration has been manifested by other governmental institutions such as “Algeria Post Office” and “the National Bank of Algeria” that are respectively displayed in figures 7 and 8. Hence, they all show that MSA letterings are always placed at the higher parts of these public boards because of this code's significance and the status it has in Algeria, i.e. being recognised as an official and national language. But they also allude to the importance of French though it has no official status.

Figure 7. Post office sign





Figure 8. Bank sign

The usage of these two languages in the public space is not only favoured by local officials but also by other individuals owning shops, restaurants, bakeries and companies, for instance. That is, it has been noticed on private signs. Among different examples, two single shop-fronts focusing on Arabic-French bilingualism have been selected. In fact, this is the only type of bilingual signs that has been found there. Yet, “the Palm tree Restaurant” (see figure 9) is a name chosen by an individual so as to attract various people to have lunch and dinner in this specific eating place. Hence, the Arabic and French decorative letterings are plainly seen by any passer-by. Besides, “the Fisherman” is another term employed in these two tongues on the façade of a store trading in fishing equipments such as buoys, hooks fishing rods, nets, canoes and kayaks. The banner’s colour on which this term appears is blue. It refers to the sea that is related to the maritime items being sold in this shop. Then, since Arabic is written from right to left, which is the opposite of French, the store proprietor focused on using the aforementioned word in MSA on the right side of the board whereas its French translation is transcribed on its left (see figure 10). These signs were designed this way as they are considered to be suitable to help people to recognise those shops. That is, the targeted individuals are supposed to understand MSA and French or at least one of these two languages.

Figure 9. Restaurant's sign



Figure 10. Fisherman's shop sign

Conclusion

The present paper is a sociolinguistic research work focusing on a popular Algerian city named Oran which is known for its cultural, commercial, touristic and industrial significance in the northern part of Africa. In fact, it attempted to investigate language use in the public sphere of a working-class area located in this metropolis, viz. *Sidi El Houari* district. So as to explore whether the signboards and banners designed by the authorities and those issued by shop/business owners are consistent or inconsistent, photography has been focused on. What has been found is that, in this area, one may not feel a great difference between top-down and bottom-up signs since both of them display various texts transcribed in MSA and/or French except for very few private banners which are exhibiting languages like English and Spanish. Indeed, no other foreign tongues were found there. Thus, what is noteworthy to mention is that the linguistic landscape of *Sidi El Houari* nearly mirrors the policy implemented by the local authorities in terms of language use. This working-class area lacks other variety of languages since it is not the destination of a large number of people with diverse origins and linguistic backgrounds including tourists. Typically, this district's LL is limited to MSA which is given an exceptional prestige due to the official status it has as well as its close connection with the Holy Qur'an, French which is considered as the first foreign language that most of educated Algerians

tend to use due to colonial reasons, English which is the global and the most widespread tongue around the world, and Spanish which is part of this site's history as it witnessed the existence of the Spanish coloniser in the past.

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