

## French Linguistic and Cultural Hegemony in a Multilingual Context: Case of the Department of English, Bejaia University

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### Abstract:

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Although the EFL teachers and students at Abderahmane Mira University in Bejaia master at least four languages, French dominates their out-of-class communication. Despite the out of class settings offer an opportunity to practice English; yet, teachers and students prefer to use French. These paradoxical observations led to question the cultural and linguistic hegemony of French in the English department's professional settings. Accordingly, this paper aims to investigate whether the use of French by EFL teachers and students at workplace results from French hegemony though Bejaia is a multilingual and multicultural context. The study is qualitative in nature in which an ethnographic research design was adopted relying on observation and interviews for data collection. Results revealed that French is used both as the language of the administration and of the professional contexts. Besides, the use of French is considered as part of the Algerians' culture and history.

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## **I. Introduction**

When a language is given superior status compared to another language or other languages in a given social milieu, the phenomenon referred to is the linguistic hegemony or as it is labelled by Woolard (1985), “linguistic authority”. Linguistic hegemony has been investigated in many studies since the wake of the twentieth century (Mustapha, 2014). Through the study of hegemony, researchers can explore “the means by which the dominant group, or the ‘leading’ group, secures its power and position” explains Saurez (2002, p. 513). The prestige and dominance of a given language results from its users’ high social status, power, richness, economic control, political strength and utility, prestige, and the historical and cultural influence. This situation is mirrored in Bejaia as a region of Kabylia in Algeria.

Given that Algeria is multilingual and multicultural as a whole, Bejaia can be considered as more complex in terms of language use. Four languages are employed in this city: Kabyle, French, Arabic, and at a less extent, English. Bejaia is remarkably a melting pot of cultures and languages; yet, what attracts the visitor’s attention to Bejaia is the presence of French everywhere whether in spoken or written discourse. French is present in interaction, in pictures, administrative language, in advertisements, and around the town (shops restaurants, hotels, road signs, displaying notes, etc.). The dominance of the French language in its social and professional context implies the existence of linguistic and cultural hegemony of the French language and culture. This situation frames the main problem addressed in the current work.

Before treating this phenomenon in Bejaia per se, the concept of hegemony needs to be clarified. The term hegemony, whose origin is traced to the Greek verb meaning, 'to lead' (Saurez, 2002), implies superiority and dominance. It is conceptualized by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) as the “intellectual and moral leadership through consent and persuasion” (Saurez, 2002, p. 512-513). The term covers also intricacies of power relations in different fields from literature, education, film to political science, history and international relations (Ives, 2004, p. 2). Meaning that linguistic minorities will believe in and participate in the subjugation of the minority language to the dominant, to the point where just the dominant language remains Saurez (2002).

Hegemony in Gramsci’s “Politics of language” is approached differently. The latter is due to wide range of explanations existing in various disciplines, focusing on its economic and essentialist Marxist roots (Ives, 2006) or as a term employed by contemporary linguistic anthropology and cultural studies (Schirru, 2016) or seen as an interest to workers in the field of Marxism, critical theory, postmodernism, multiculturalism, nationalism, colonialism, post-colonialism, new social movements,

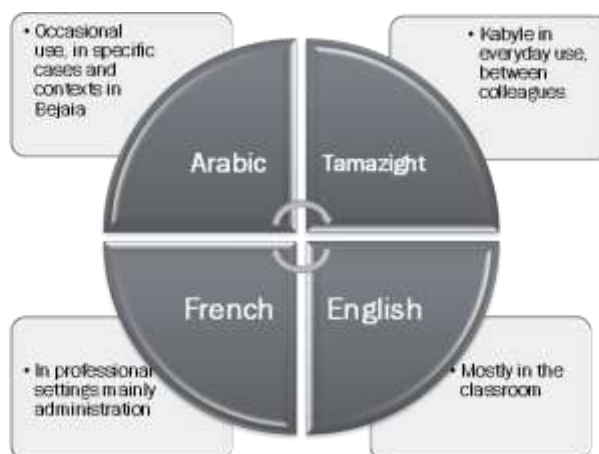
deliberative democracy and globalization (Ives, 2006). The Gramscian's concept of hegemony includes "three concomitant processes: leadership without force, leadership through legitimation, and leadership through consensual rule" (Saurez, 2002, p. 513). In the first process, leadership is exercised over the subordinate group by the dominant group through a growth of consciousness. The second process, "leadership through legitimation", indicates that the subjugated group does not question leadership by the dominant group and sees it as the correct and logical state of affairs", clarifies Mrak (2011, p. 162). The last process of hegemony "leadership through consensual rule" implies that the minority group is convinced that their position, which is of their own choice, is equal to that of the dominant group (Saurez, 2002; Mrak, 2011). Different from Gramsci's approach to hegemony, Woolard (1985, p. 739) regarded that hegemony is "a problem of authority and collaboration or consent, in contrast to domination and coercion".

In this study, the politics of language and multiculturalism make up the core of hegemony in a country where language policy and practice is complicated in a multilingual and multicultural society whose diversity is historically, ethnically and culturally bound. Via an ethnographic research, the main objective is to explore the place the French language and culture have in the Bejaoui environment at the department of English at Abderhamane Mira University in Bejaia.

### II. Study Background

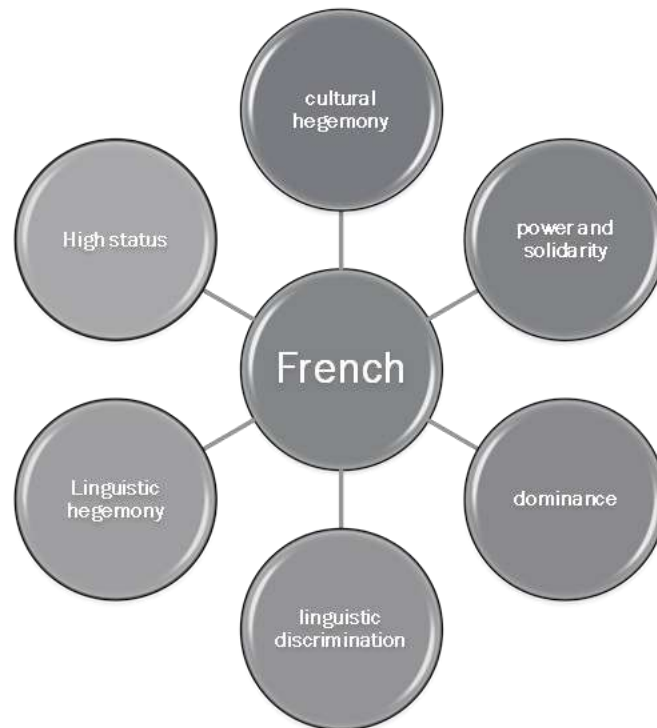
The status of language is manifested in how much it is used by a given community. Language use refers to the communicative meaning of language. In the context of the current investigation, language use in the Department of English can be summarized as follows:

**Figure 01: The Four Languages used in Bejaia's Department of English**



In figure 01, we tried to outline the status of language use in the Department of English as a result of the observation collected as part of the ethnographic research over a period of 15 years. It was concluded that the French language is used mostly in administration and professional reports. The native language, Kabyle, is used between colleagues, and Algerian Arabic is occasionally used and is used only in specific contexts. As for English, the language taught at the Department, it is used mainly in classes and sometimes between teachers and their students in specific situations. These observations triggered the investigation of “French Hegemony” in the department’s context. This work tackles the French use in the context of the Department of English, where its hegemony seems apparent after a long period of observation. The elements that characterize the French language are outlined illustrated in Figure 2.

**Figure n° 02: French Characteristics in Bejaia**



This research is based on the place of the French language and culture in the Bejaoui community. Therefore, we related French to culture, power and solidarity, dominance, linguistic/cultural discrimination, linguistic/cultural hegemony, and high status. These concepts exist in the context of Bejaia and in the Department of English as well as shown in Figure 2.

### **III. Methods and Materials**

As explained in the introduction, the ethnographic research based on participants’ observation helped to confirm that the French language is influential and has a high status in the professional setting. Such observations take part of the daily routine of the researcher who observes all language use and the speech

acts uttered by the teachers when meeting their students in different settings outside their classes namely: in the staff room, in office, in the administration, in the Department's regular meetings and when just meeting outside the class for any enquiry a student may have.

After the findings generated from our observation to the participants' language use in the context of the English Department at Bejaia University, the author decided to get in deep in his investigation by getting data from the participants themselves. In addition to data collected through participant's observation, online interviews were conducted for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. The involved participants included thirteen university teachers (N° =13) where seven (7) of them are female teachers; yet, the remaining four (4) are male teachers. Their teaching experience varies between four (4) to twenty two (22) years.

To collect reliable and valid qualitative data, we relied on a semi-structured interview which encompasses eight (8) items that aims at finding out the reasons that lead teachers to opt for the use of French when communicating instead of English or the first language (Arabic, or Tamazight).

### **IV. Results and Discussion**

The data collected, which is qualitative, was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively as shown in this section.

#### **1. Participants Observation**

Since 2003, the researcher started teaching part-time in the department of English, she noticed the over-dominance of French use as the language of communication at the University. In that all professional exchange, whether oral or written, is done in the French. Such noticeable difference between the University of Setif from which the researcher graduated and the University of Bejaia where she is exercising the teaching profession at the department of English in terms of using French rather than English or Arabic (the official language used in official texts after the Arabization process) stimulated the researcher to start participants observation in terms of language use and exchange. According to this longitudinal ethnographic research based on participants observation, we noticed that the majority of the Department's members whether students, teachers and staff use French when addressing each other.

To identify where the use of French is common, the first phase of the research revealed that this language is mainly used in:

- Administration (written and spoken)
- In regular meetings, disciplinary council, scientific committees, etc.
- Between colleagues (superiors-teachers, agents-teachers, teachers teachers)

- In out-of-classroom interactions (student-teacher)

All in all, French is used when replying to telephone calls, in meetings, in opening official events, in addressing colleagues and officials, in drafting all kinds of reports, in displaying notes and marks, in the website and administrative platforms, in official documents (viva's reports, committees reports, announcements, registration, library platform, e-learning platform, etc)..

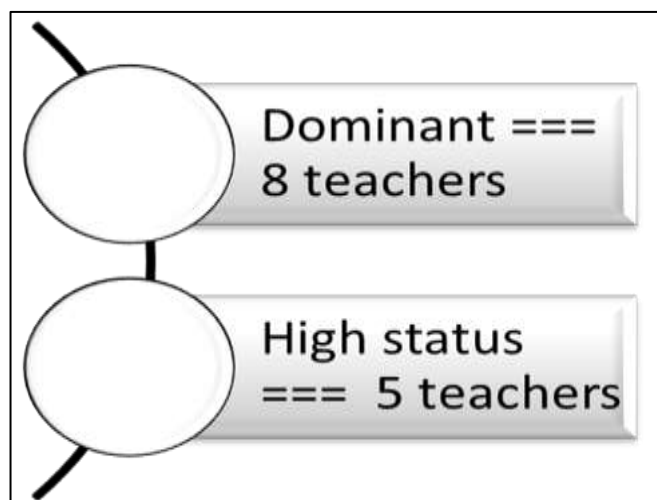
## 2. The Interview

To collect more data about how French is used, why it is preferred, when and where this language is used; thirteen teachers were interviewed. The interviewees were asked to respond to eight questions. The interview findings are summarised as follows:

“French Use and Position”: As for the use and the status of this language in the interviewees’ professional environment, almost all teachers agreed that French is the language that teachers employ when addressing their students outside the classroom. Whereas ten (10) of them use just French, the three others (03) mix languages (English, French, Arabic, and Tamazight) to fit the learners’ needs. When asked about when and where they opt for French in their communicative acts, the participants stated a number of elements that are related to the status and position of French in the Department of English.

Adding to the recognized status and position of French use at the department of English, the interviewees’ answers revealed that this language holds a number of attributes such as “French is (a) formal language, (b) professional and academic language, (c) useful language, (d) historical heritage”. The French status as seen by the teachers is displayed in Figure 03.

**Figure n° 03: French in the Eyes of the Teachers of English**



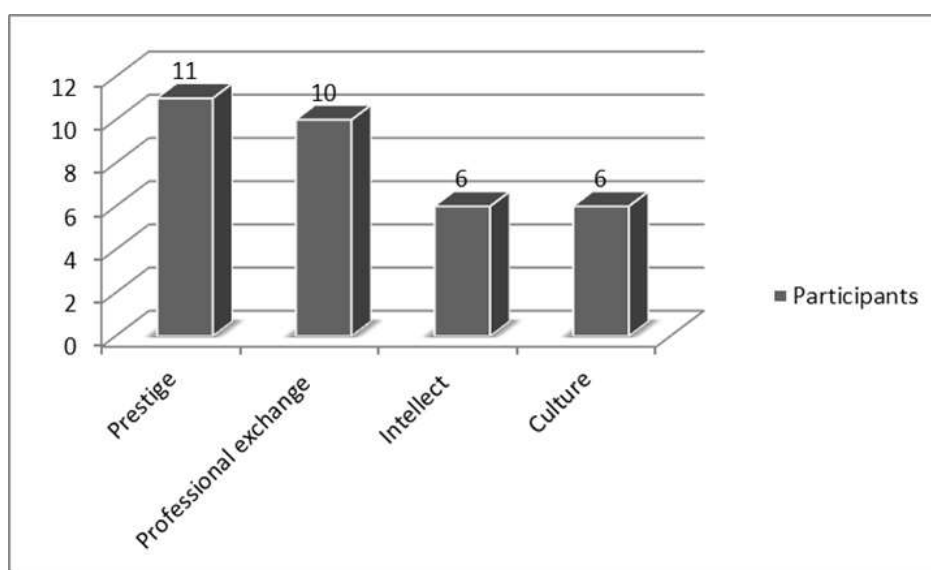
As presented in Figure 03, eight (08) teachers regarded French as the dominant one. Moreover, the remaining interviewees (03 teachers) asserted that French holds a high status among its users at the university. When questioning them about the reason behind classifying French as a dominant language with a high status, teachers used different but interrelated descriptions that can be grouped as follows:

- French is regarded as an important, preferred and a widely used language with comfort.

- French is the language of knowledge, education, administration, history, respect, distance, formality, relations, fashion, and cuisine.

When interrogated to classify the domains where French is used, the respondents categorised the domains of French use into four main categories. The latter is displayed in the figure below.

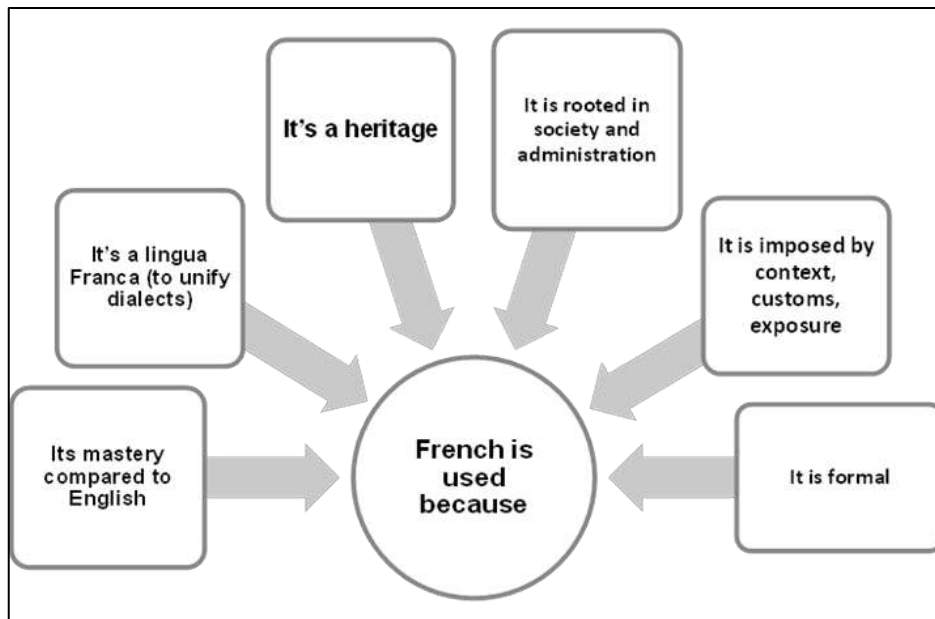
**Figure n° 04: Reasons behind French Language Dominance in the English Department**



As presented in Figure 04, the majority of the interviewees declare that French is the language of “Prestige” (N°= 11) and the language of “Professional Exchange” (N°=10). Additionally, similar portions of the participants relate the use of French to intellect (06) and to culture.

To gain more insights about why French is the most preferred language to be used, the interviews were asked to list their arguments. Figure 05 abridges the participants’ justifications:

Figure n° 05: Reasons behind French Use



It is noticeable from the Figure above that the participants seem to display positive attitudes towards French use. Moreover, their accounts carry a number of reasons justifying the why(s) behind French use. The majority of them agreed that factors such as the mastery of French over English, the context in which it exists and its historical roots make of French the language of formality. Additionally, professional exchange and a unifying factor of linguistic exchange among Kabyle teacher.

## V. Discussion

Algeria has been socially, culturally and linguistically influenced by a number of civilizations due to the many conquerors like Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Byzantines, Arabs, Turks and French. Among all these colonizers' languages, the French language remains existent and alive in the Algerian's daily life and mainly present in the professional settings in various regions in the country. This reality is confirmed through the participants' testimonies. One of the interviewed participants (teacher 3) argued that "French remains part of the daily conversations of Algerian speakers and it acquired along with their mother tongues". Another interviewee (teacher 2) added, "Nowadays, students use French at the university because it's the language they use with their family, so there are some students who they don't master their mother language".

The practice and teaching of French was reinforced after independence, giving rise to situations of bilingualism and even multilingualism among Algerian speakers (Mérrouani, 2009). This implies that due to the complex history in Algeria, the linguistic landscape is plurilingual resulting in four competing spoken



languages including literary Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Tamazight and French (Chemami, 2011; Benrabah, 2014). Although, the language policy in Algeria opted for the Arabization of the school after its independence, science and technology and many specialties at university remained taught in French. In that more than 90% of higher education courses in sciences or in medicine are taught in French language (Miliani, 2000). This made the French language 'hegemonic' since then.

According to the present study's findings, French is used in the Department of English at Bejaia University. Despite the working place is an English department, teachers prefer communicating in French instead of English or Arabic. The respondents' quotes reflect this phenomenon. One of them (teacher 5) said:

The French language is the preferred language for administration in Bejaia University. All notes, announcements are made in this language. French is the dominant language in Bejaia, I can dare to say that sometime it equals Kabyle even in speech exchanges. I guess, it is the case due to historical reasons and cultural ones as well. We tend to accept French as a means of communication despite the fact that it is a foreign language. We prefer it to Arabic as there is very little interest or use of Arabic in Administrations and people grew up reading and completing paperwork in French than in Arabic. I guess this is true not only in Bejaia but in Kabylie region as well.

It is true that the use of French is historically bound. During the French colonial existence (1830-1962), the French policy in Algeria was targeting the creation of what was called "the French Algeria". This project that was for the total replacement of the Arabic language by the French one in schools started after declaring Algeria as part of the French territory in 1848. At that time, new schools labeled as "Ecoles Arabes Francaises" were created. These schools were established "to train selected Algerian pupils for the minor posts in the colonial services which would be open to them according to their knowledge of the French language" (Djabri, 1981, p. 44). Since then, France started generalizing modern schools to replace Kutab where Arabic was taught (Benrabah, 1999). This led Algerians to adopt the French culture and language socially and mainly in schools and administrations.

One of the interviewed teachers (T5) who worked as a head of department witnessed:

Inside my classroom I always use English but in my office as a head of department I use French, Kabyle and English the reason is due to the fact that I already have

worked in an administration where the language used was French so it is a matter of habit besides our students prefer using French and Kabyle.

In his study to the Algerian linguistic landscape, Grand Guillaume (1996) related French to history. For him this language has rooted in Algerians linguistic plurality. This makes French, a historical heritage Algerians use, though at different degrees from a region to another. In this respect one of the interrogated interviewees (teacher 05) revealed:

French is a historical heritage, mainly in areas where the French colonizer established his settlements this may explain the wide use of this language so since our independence French was introduced in schools at an early stage besides it was for professional exchange just after the independence since most of those who occupied positions in the administration studied in schools where the teachers were French colonizers.

Why French is a dominant language in Algeria could be explained by the position this language holds as a spoken language in the world. According to Oberlé (2004), “today’s Algeria is the second largest French-speaking community in the world” (cited in Benrabah, 2007, p. 194), with nearly eighteen million speakers of French (Chemami, 2011, p. 231). As such, French linguistic and cultural hegemony remains a debatable topic among researchers and scholars.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Concisely, we are still thinking of how to put variables together. Concepts like linguistic and cultural hegemony, linguistic imperialism, and linguistic discrimination loom into the horizon. The principle of power and solidarity can be implicitly discussed and can occur along with the above-mentioned concepts. In our assumption, we can link the use of French to hegemony on the one hand; and on the other hand, the use of French can be related to its role in determining social relations like the sociolinguistic aspects (degrees of intimacy and social distance teachers maintain via the use of French instead of Kabyle). As for why not English, we assume it is related to the region's use of French as a language of prestige, intellectuals, administration, and academic and professional exchange. Given that the interlocutors are in an educational setting (university), the status is well shown via the use of French. Hence, the position of French in the Kabyle region is quite needed to justify its use in an EFL context. Better to end our discussion by a quote in which a teacher asserts: “I have noticed many young parents, in Bejaia and villages around, addressing their children in French. In this case, I think it is a form of show off or shame of their mother tongue”.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 01: The interview Questions**

Dear ELT instructors in the Department of English at Bejaia University, It is my pleasure to conduct research on the place and the use of French in Bejaia and more particularly by EFL teachers when addressing their students outside the classroom setting. Your answer will help treat this phenomenon from a sociolinguistic standpoint.

1. There is tendency to use French when teachers and students communicate together outside the EFL classroom and when they interact. What do you think?
2. How about you? Which language do you use in such a case and why?
3. How do you perceive the position and status of French in Bejaia mainly the university setting?
4. Is French, according to you, the language of prestige, of culture, of intellect, of professional exchange, or what?
5. Why do you use French in your department? Why not English? Why not Arabic, or simply why not Kabyle?
6. Is using French a means to keep social distance, distinguish your position and relationship with the learner or keep close relationship with the learners (degree of intimacy)?
7. Final notes and comments: .....
8. About you: age, gender, years of experience teaching at university, languages you speak: .....

Thank you for taking time in answering this short interview

**Appendix 2:** Pictures from Bejaia University displaying the French hegemony aspect



المملكة المغربية  
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جامعة عبدالمولود عيسى  
Eskissat Abdoulmoukheiss Eissa  
Faculté des Sciences de la Nature et de la Vie  
Vice-Décanat chargé des Etudes et des Questions Liées aux Étudiants

وزارة التعليم  
والتعليم العالي  
مملكة المغرب  
جامعة عبدالمولود عيسى

## Avis aux étudiants

Les étudiants ayant déposé des demandes de réintégration des études pour l'année universitaire 2018-2019 sont priés de se rapprocher du Vice-Décanat de la pédagogie dans les plus brefs délais.

Dr. MOUAD  
Vice-Décanat chargé des Etudes  
et des Questions Liées aux Étudiants

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