

MULTILINGUALISM: A CHALLENGE TO THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM IN ALGERIA

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ABSTRACT

In Algeria, multilingualism can be considered a norm rather than an exception because of the coexistence of Arabic with its different varieties, on the one hand, and French and Berber varieties, on the other. This linguistic situation comes from its intricate history. Education is therefore perceived as the terrain *par excellence* where language-related rivalry is manifested. This, in fact, creates a kind of challenge for policy-makers, concerned with difficult decisions to undertake with regard to languages, schooling and the curricula in which the technical and the political often overlap. Language and, in particular, the choice of language of instruction in education is one such concern and often invokes contrasting and deeply felt positions. Questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the educational sphere. Language itself, moreover, possesses its own dynamics and is constantly undergoing processes of both continuity and change, impacting upon the communication modes of different societies as it evolves. The purpose of this work, therefore, is to consider some of the central issues concerning languages and education in the Algerian context and the ways the country's multilingual history has influenced and continues to direct the choice of languages used in educational institutions.

KEYWORDS: Multilingualism, Foreign languages in Algeria, Language Policies, Educational Reform

INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism as a Sociolinguistic Field of Inquiry

Multilingualism is a common sociolinguistic phenomenon. It would be in fact difficult to find a country which is completely monolingual because multilingualism is the norm not the exception. "To be bilingual or multilingual is not the aberration supposed by many (...); it is, rather a normal and unremarkable necessity for the majority in the world today." (Edwards 1994:1). Multilingualism can be defined in various ways, but basically it is the ability to use more than two languages. A clear distinction when discussing multilingualism is between the individual and societal level. At the individual level, the term multilingualism refers to the speaker's competence to use two or more languages. At the societal level multilingualism refers to the use of two or more languages in a given speech community and it does not necessarily imply that all the speakers in that community show competence in more than two languages.

Indeed, different factors contribute to the spread of multilingualism. Some of them are:

- Education; second and foreign languages are part of the curriculum in many countries.
- Increasing communications among different parts of the world and the need to be competent in languages of wider communication.
- Religion movements that result in people moving to a new country.
- Historical or political movements such as imperialism or colonialism.

- Social and cultural identity and the interest for maintenance and revival of minority languages.
- Economic movements in the case of migration.

MULTILINGUALISM IN ALGERIA

Any discussion in relation to the Algerian sociolinguistic situation will remain incomplete without reference to the phenomenon of multilingualism. Thus, the linguistic landscape of Algeria is multilingual because of the existence of four spoken languages and language varieties: Standard Arabic, Algerian Arabic, Berber (Tamazight and other varieties) and French.

Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is that variety of Arabic which is related to the so-called 'Classical Arabic' (CA), perceived as the super-standardized language with huge prestige for its association with the Qu'ran. MSA is used in very formal contexts and in some TV programmes and news reports. Most frequently, in conversations between professionals from different countries, forms of what is known as Educated Spoken Arabic (ESA henceforth)¹, or Formal Spoken Arabic (FSA), an intermediate variety based on vernaculars, may be used rather than MSA (Ryding, 1991).

Algerian Arabic, which includes the sum total of regional dialects varying from one region to another and from city to city, serves as a vehicle of daily communication. The point is that MSA, ESA and colloquial Arabic seem to create a continuum from which native speakers may choose the appropriate variety at distinct times and occasions.

In addition, different Berber varieties are spoken in different regions in Algeria, among which Tamazight constitutes one of the principle components of the Algerian identity. In fact, Tamazight is the oldest language of Maghreb (Montagnon, 1998: 21). French, a language worthy of consideration, has been introduced in the Algerian linguistic landscape as a result of the French colonization for more than a century and even though French is now politically regarded as the first 'foreign' language from a linguistic standpoint, it echoes the function of co-official language along literary Arabic.

Indeed, the long-term contact between the different autochthonous groups (Berbers, Arabs, and French) has resulted in a community where the dynamics of language contact characterizes the daily speech of Algerian speakers. These phenomena are namely, code-switching, code-mixing and borrowing which are mainly represented in the relationship between Arabic and French, in addition to the H/L diglossic relationship.

THE LANGUAGE POLICIES AFTER 1962

When the decisions of language planning are taken, that means one single language is declared to be the national language in a multilingual country. Lamamra (2006:30) mentions that in Algeria, language policy has been a debated process since the country obtained its independence from France in 1962; The French language was the dominant language in every field of life. She asserts that "some of the questions arose in post-independent Algeria where the place of the French language to have in the Algerian society, and the role played in affecting the local dialect. Should French, the colonizer's language, be placed at the same level of importance as Arabic by making it a national language of Algeria?"

The issue of language education policies in Algeria is very sensitive. Berger (2002:8) supports this idea by stating that it is "the most severe problem of Algeria in its present and troubled state". A basic distinction when discussing

¹See section 1.5.4. for more details.

language policies of Algeria is between the policy of Arabisation during the period 1962- 1999 and the educational reform since 2000.

Arabisation

In Algeria, the fundamental aim of the Arabisation policy was to move away French as the language of education and instruction, and to substitute it by the Arabic language, as correctly assessed by Derni (2009: 285): “The selection of Arabic in language planning in Algeria has always been considered as an anti-colonial act against French, which was solely taught at primary, middle, secondary and university levels from 1830 to 1962”.

Indeed, the Arabisation process aims at restoring and reinforcing the use of MSA as an official language of the nation in many spheres such as justice, the media, the administration and especially education where apparently the most significant measures have been taken. One of the principal reforms established in the newly independent nation was to restore Arabic in the education sector. In the *Tripoli Programme* of June 1962,

The Revolutionaries restated in regard to Arabic, what they did in constant manifestos before: “[the role of the revolution]... is above... all to restore to Arabic—the very expression of the cultural values of our country—its dignity and its efficacy as a language of civilisation.” (Gordon, 1978:149).

Indeed, three important elements contribute to the motivation of the Arabisation policy. First, the Arabic language represents the cultural side of independence: French is the language imposed by the colonizer. Secondly, Arabic is the language of Islam: Islam was a shelter during colonization when Algeria had not an identity. Finally, Arabic is the language of the Arab nation. (McDougall, 2006: 338).

The shift to Arabic as the only medium of instruction in primary, middle and secondary education has led to serious problems. In fact, teachers at that period were not prepared to this sudden transition. They were known as ‘Francophones’ because of the French education they had received during the colonial era.

In spite of the efforts spent by decision-makers for the implementation of MSA in the Algerian educational and administrative systems, the Arabisation process has been subject to criticism and was accused to have no scientific basis and as responsible for the decline in pupils’ educational achievements in general. Algerian policy makers themselves have witnessed shortcomings and negative outcomes of the Arabisation programme declared by the Algerian first president and his successors. The malfunction of Arabisation in Algeria is mainly due to the fact that the process has always been decided by the authorities not on a linguistic basis, but on political and ideological grounds.

However, as Benmayouf says (2010: 56-57), “we cannot only understand this policy in negative terms but the main purpose of Arabisation was to turn the Arabic language as a true instrument of thought and work to reach the requirements of time and to overcome the prejudice of language literature and poetry.”

Educational Reform

The National Commission for the Reform of Education System was created in March 2000 (CNRSE, acronym of its French name) after the Algerian government has come to admit that education is a ‘failure’. Benrabah (2007: 226) cited two examples of student achievement as illustrations of this failure. The first illustration concerns all the pupils from ten classes in the city of Mascara who took their final examination at the end of the primary cycle in June 2005 and none of them succeeded. The second illustration relates to university standards.

According to Benrabah (ibid), “In mid- November 2005, the Minister of Higher Education declared that 80% of first-year students fail their final exams because of linguistic incompetence”. The principal reason of this failure corresponds to the weak level in French for the majority of students enrolled in higher education as they have been schooled through Literary Arabic.

The aim of CNRSE is to diagnose vocational training in addition to the components of the educational system and modernize the educational sector. In March 2001, this new reform recommended a reintroduction of French as the first mandatory foreign language in Grade Two of the primary cycle instead of starting it in Grade Four as had been the case since the late 1970’s (Benrabah, 2007: 227), but despite this new reform, low standards in French usage are still highly noticeable at all grades and levels among most Algerian pupils and students as well.

STATUS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN ALGERIA

One of the primary tasks of any state is to promote good education and implement curricula and programmes that fit the requirements of both societies and individuals using appropriate textbooks. In fact, any society has its own reasons and motivations for choosing to teach foreign languages and providing conditions for learning them. The selection is based on their status in their target situation.

Status of French in Algeria

French, a language worthy of consideration, has been introduced in the Algerian linguistic landscape as a result of the French colonization for more than a century. Though it is now politically regarded as ‘first foreign language’ from a linguistic standpoint, it echoes the function of co-official language alongside Arabic. French is present in a great deal of prestigious domains such as education, administration and government, economics and business.

Despite the fact that French is not recognized as an official language in the country, it remains an important language because it is taught as a compulsory subject starting from the third grade in primary education. It has also its place in secondary education as a second language, and in higher education, it remains the key language especially in scientific streams such as medicine, biology and technology studies.

Algeria remains the second largest Francophone country, despite its ideological refusal to integrate the Francophonie. It is regarded as the language of modernity, advancement and intellectual distinction, gaining a prestigious status among Algerian people who develop a clear and particular preference to learn and use it. When asked by an Algerian journalist why he did not publish his works in Algeria, Yasmina Khadra whose literary work is highly translated throughout the world affirmed in the autumn of 2005:

Asking me to publish in Algeria reminds me of Malek Haddad who was forced to give up his immense talent for commonplace considerations: because he wrote in French! As if the French language was a shameful disease, a heresy. As a result, Algerian literature prematurely lost one of its great masters. It will not work with me. They won’t shut me up that way. I love the French language and it pays me back well. It taught me everything I know and made me known all over the world.²

²My translation of the French original text : « Me demander d’éditer en Algérie me rappelle Malek Haddad contraint de renoncer à son immense talent pour des considérations roturières: parce qu’il écrivait en français ! Comme si la langue française était une maladie honteuse, une hérésie. Résultat, la littérature algérienne a perdu

Moreover, the French language in Algeria is doing well despite the strict language policies against it (Benrabah, 2007: 240). This Algerian paradox concerns the language policies implemented in the educational system and their effect on the maintenance and spread of French. Benrabah (2007:193) says in this respect: "It is quite ironic that independent Algeria has done more to assist the spread of this language than the colonial authorities did throughout the 132 years of French presence".

However, at present, it is worth mentioning that considerably low standards are obtained at nearly all levels, for Algerians are neither good in Standard Arabic nor in French. Further, if we consider the scientific and technological streams which would better be taught in English, -- especially in this era of globalization -- these are actually taught in French, and as a result, most students show an alarming linguistic achievement gap due to their poor proficiency in French, and mainly their lack of the necessary vocabulary in this language.

Status of English in the Algerian Society

In Algeria, the power of the English language and its spread is clearly noticeable. In fact, it is the most important foreign language taught after French, which is actually regarded as a second language pervading big portions of the society at large. As a matter of fact, Harmer (2001:1) states that English is "a language widely adopted for communication between speakers whose native languages are different from each other's and where one or both speakers are using it as a second language".

From the end of the 1970's to the early 1990's, English was the second foreign language introduced in the middle cycle. In 1993, it was introduced as a competitor to French from the part of the ministry of primary and secondary education. Thus, fourth grade pupils of the primary cycle had to pick up either French or English as the first mandatory foreign language and the competition turned in favor of French unexpectedly.

Today, English is taught as the second foreign language starting from the first grade level in the middle school. Its teaching has been in competition with the French language since 2000. However, in universities, 95% of undergraduate and post-graduate courses in sciences or in medicine are still taught in the French language (Miliani, 2000: 20).

Additionally and more recently, Derni (2009: 284) says that:

English has not only been acknowledged in the Algerian educational system, but it is seemingly developing as an integral part of AA itself, especially among young people and that has often been introduced through French via forms like 'taxiphone', 'fast-food', 'week-end', 'chat', 'internet', 'windows', 'surfing', 'web', 'foot', 'penalty' and so on.

In Algeria, learning and teaching foreign languages have reached much importance in the new curricula, and as a result, English has gained more attention in the educational sphere; it has also been introduced in labour and production fields. The globalisation process, has introduced English in various non- English speaking countries throughout the world notwithstanding the various constraints of politics, geography, economy, cultural and social arrangements decrease to make the globe smaller.

prématurément l'un de ses grands maîtres. Ça ne marchera pas avec moi. On ne me fera pas taire de cette façon. J'adore la langue française et elle me le rend bien. Elle m'a appris tout ce que je sais et m'a fait connaître dans le monde entier. »

Mentioned in LB. Ben Achour, 'YasminaKhadra. Ecrivain', *El Watan*, 14-15 October, 2005, p. 19.

CONCLUSIONS

The numerous conquests by peoples from different cultures and identities have had a great impact on Algeria's linguistic landscape. In fact, just like all other Arabic-speaking countries, Algeria constitutionally defines Arabic as the official language of the country, and thus as the medium of formal instruction, in spite of the fact that it is a multilingual and complex state. Its complexity lies in the co-existence of more than one language, each with its different varieties at play: First, Classical Arabic with its modern form Literary Arabic or Modern Standard Arabic; secondly, the coexistence of a wide range of Algerian Arabic varieties in addition to the indigenous Berber varieties scattered in a number of areas in the country; French which is a linguistic inheritance from the colonial period, Spanish and Turkish existing in the form of borrowings, and finally English which is considered as a language of modernity and instruction introduced today in the first grade of middle school.

French became rooted in Algeria where it still enjoys a high status. Today, this language is considered as an important tool in all domains. Hence, with the help of institutions such as the educational system, independent Algeria has allowed French to be maintained and even spread to the point of turning the country into the second Francophone community in the world after France. The implications of such language maintenance are important for language policy in Algeria.

Furthermore, today's younger generations show positive attitudes towards English for its association with progress and modernity as well as its consideration as an important means of communication with the external world. This intricate linguistic picture poses in fact a considerable challenge for Algerian policy-makers often concerned with the right decisions to undertake on the choice of languages of instruction in educational institutions.

By way of conclusion, we can point out that Algeria seems in need of more than one cultural language for complementary objectives. Decision makers would rather put in place a multilingual policy beyond the opposition which reserves French and English languages for modernity and standard Arabic for tradition. In short, in the educational sphere, the Algerian authorities need to move in the direction of other reforms which support linguistic pluralism and abandon the sole and unique policy of Arabisation.

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