

The Language Question in the Arab World: Evidence from Algeria

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In the last twenty years, there has been a continual protest over the language question in Algeria, as regards Tamazight in particular. Four languages are spoken in one way or another by Algerians: Classical Arabic the official language, Algerian Arabic spoken by almost all Algerians, French and Berber. The Arabisation policy conducted with no discernment subtlety, raised the problem of languages statuses especially Berber. Indeed, in recent years, there have been various protests movements against the imposition of Classical Arabic as the national language. The demands for Berber culture and language raised in their own way and at another level, the problem of national integration of communities that have their own ancestral languages and cultures.

It is necessary to stress that all of the Algerian political culture is limited by the nationalist horizon and its unipolar and centralized conception of the state and the nation. In all current politics, both the opposition and those who cooperate with the '*Pouvoir*' (*power*), the ideology of the central State is so deep, they cannot conceive another model of the state other than "a Republic, one and indivisible" and a nation formed by a single people, with its common language, culture, and history. As if the other configurations did not exist, as if national unity inevitably implied linguistic, cultural, and administrative uniformity.

In Algeria, we notice that each language has a particular socio-cultural position in the country. Such a position is the result of historical development through which such languages have acquired different statuses of a paramount importance at the socio-linguistic and political levels.

During the colonial period for instance, French was the only official language and Classical Arabic took the position of a foreign language taught in Koranic and religious

schools. However, this situation changed after independence when Classical Arabic was implemented as a national language in place of French.¹

The launching of the Arabisation process intensified the use of Classical Arabic in public domains and hugely helped in the promotion and implementation of Classical Arabic, but at the same time reduced the statuses of the other languages notably Berber. In this sense, it seems that the Berber question is neither ethnic nor really religious, even if the demands of Berber identity are mainly expressed in a particular part of the country, Kabylia. Despite the population's Arabisation and conversion to Islam, it seems that some regions mainly in the highlands conserved their cultural and linguistic heritage. The Berbers claim an identity different from, and in contradiction to, the exclusivist culture of the state.

They also specifically demand, among other things: the official recognition of the Berber component of Algerian identity; the promotion of the Algerian popular culture, be it Arabic or Berber; and the official recognition of Berber language (Tamazight) and colloquial Arabic as national languages and their teaching at all levels of education.

In order to understand the root cause of such political polemic, an overview of the historical development of languages in Algeria is a paramount importance.

Thus, the present article sketches the historical development of languages in Algeria starting from the eve of the first settlement in North Africa until today's sociolinguistic situation.

1.The Historical Background of Languages in Algeria

Now, I will survey the historical background of languages in Algeria including the historical development of languages notably Classical Arabic, Algerian Arabic, French and Berber starting from earlier periods until the present day.

¹ (Instead of using the term 'Modern Standard Arabic', I keep using the term 'Classical Arabic', meaning the modern version of Arabic which is taught in schools and used in public and formal domains).

1.2 Before the Arab Conquest

Since time immemorial, Algeria was the centre of invaders' interests from various parts of the world notably from the East, the Mediterranean and Europe. The fact that Algeria was conquered or inhabited by peoples from various identities and cultures, this has certainly a great impact on its linguistic situation.

The recorded history which goes back to the fifteenth Century B.C states that the Berber are the first settlers, thus North Africa including Algeria was a Berber world. To trace the roots of the Berbers, one must travel back to Classical Period and the kingdom of Numidia which extended from Carthage in present day Tunisia to Mauritania on the Atlantic Coast. The proud and independent Numidians had their own customs, culture and identity that their generation today is trying to keep and preserve from eradication. With their capital in what is now Eastern Algeria, they fought ceaselessly against the imperial invaders of antiquity such as Phoenicians. During the Phoenician Period starting from 1200 BC, the North African settlers spoke Berber in the countryside, and in the cities, they used Punic; a Chamitic language which is related to both Hebrew and Arabic. The Numidians were known to Rome as 'Berbers' from the Latin 'Barbarus' meaning 'an alien land or people'.

Later on, under the Numidian kings of 'Juba I' and 'Juba II', the Romans colonised Numidia or Barbary, displacing therefore a vast number of Berbers from the region's most fertile land. Hence, the Berbers impoverished and stripped of their lands, found refuge in the wildest, rockiest and most inhospitable terrain of the country. Some Berbers became quasi nomads, others worked for the Romans in the colonial cities or in the fields.

During this period, Latin was established as the official language of the elite living in urban cities, while Berber was spoken by peasants in the countryside.

The Christian Father St Augustine of Hippo (now Annaba) called 'Time of Catastrophe' for the Apartheid period of Roman dominion. Between 340 and 535, the Vandals and the Visigoths systematically destroyed the Roman empire and its social system. When the Germanic Vandals surged into Numidia, the Berbers were forced even deeper into the

barren inferior of North Africa. Worse was to come, however in the 6th century when the Vandals were supplanted in North Africa by the Byzantine, who sought to reconstruct a 'Romanized' Empire.

It seems that the Berbers under various dominions were sowing the seeds for centuries of religious, disputes and sociolinguistic persecutions. Hence, they could only survive as scattered tribes in the mountains and deserts and did all their best to preserve their linguistic heritage intact from any foreign destruction or eradication. Nevertheless, the linguistic impact of Romans upon the population was important. Indeed, people in North Africa continued to speak Latin and Punic in the towns and Berber in the countryside even after the fall of the Roman Empire.

It should be noted that the hostile environment that surrounded the Berbers had toughened their resistance and forged their personality. They have their own language and literature, a fierce affection to their land and particular life style.

1.2 The Arab Conquest

Algeria was conquered by Arabs in the late 7th Century and early 8th Century (642 AD) whose introduction of Islam profoundly altered the character of the area. Unlike the invasions of previous religions and cultures, the coming of Islam which was spread by Arabs, was to have a pervasive and long-lasting effects on the Maghreb. The new faith in its various forms, would penetrate nearly all segments of society bringing with it a new language, new religion, tribal loyalties and practices with new sociolinguistic norms and political idioms. The islamisation of the region was complicated and lengthy process (from the 7th century until the 8th century).

It is worthwhile to note that the relations between the Berber inhabitants of the region and the Muslim invaders were not only marked just by struggles but also by alliances and mutual recognition. Only the tribes of the Aures with their history of prior harassment by Romans, Vandals and Byzantines continued to resist to Arabs incursion into their territory. The pre-islamic Berbers were by and large pagans, some of whom had some notion of Christian beliefs nevertheless they converted themselves to Islam.

Indeed, after the Arab conquest, Islam was obviously implemented with Muslim theocratic law and political institutions.

In sum, Koranic or Islamic rules governed North Africa. The Arabisation of North Africa took about 13 centuries during which many Berber tribes became Arabised like "The Zenata" and some Arab tribes like "Les Beni Mhamed" became Berbophone. Thus, Islam permitted North Africa not only to maintain its independence but also to provide a political framework into which tribal loyalties were subsumed. As a result of their conversion to Islam, most of Berbers were not dislodged from their lands nor did they become vassals of the Muslims. Hence, they continued to speak their language among themselves. Although Arabisation spread all over the Berber tribes, the latter did all their best to conserve their linguistic heritage and cultural identity. Moreover, they succeeded in preserving their various dialects in different geographical areas.

As a written form, Berbers adopted Classical Arabic; the language of the universal Koran and the liturgical language of Islam. Interestingly enough, the arrival of Arabs prevented the Berber language from developing a written form, in fact, writing was reserved for Arabic which became the new vehicle of propaganda as the new conquerors spread the holy word through the Koran.

From that time on, scientific and socio-cultural life of North Africa became inseparable from that of Muslims counterparts throughout the world. Thus, cities such like Tlemcen, Bejaia and Constantine were also a vivid symbol of Islam and the powerful Muslim world. Overtime, there was a great harmony or ' osmosis' between Arabs and Berbers, creating therefore a new and specifically North African blend of cultures and tongues. Interestingly enough, the Arabophone Berbers of North Africa erected a series of brilliant dynasties such as: the Rustamids, Fatimids, Idrissids, Zirids, Almohads, Merinids and all contributed effectively to the enrichment of the socio-cultural and linguistic patrimony of the Maghreb in general, and Algeria in particular.

In the late 15th Century, North Africa was plunged into the struggles between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Threatened by the rise of Christian Europe, North Africa sought refuge with Ottoman Empire which governed most of the central Maghreb until the 19th Century.

Thus, Algeria became a part of the Ottoman empire and was governed by "a dey" (a Turkish governor). Despite the long occupation by the Turks, their linguistic impact upon the population was almost nil. In fact, Berber and Arabic maintained themselves intact. 1830 witnessed the beginning of the French settlement in Algeria.

1.3 The French period

Starting from 1830, France colonized Algeria and imposed its socio-economic and linguistic control upon the speech community. Hence, French became the official language and Classical Arabic was the language of Academics both in traditional and religious schools. The French policy was designed to make Algeria an extension of Metropolitan France on the Southern side of the Mediterranean sea. Such a goal could be achieved only by sowing division between Arabs and Berbers and eradicating Arabo-Muslim values and civilization from Algeria. Under the French colonialism, French became the official language and Classical Arabic was the language of academics both in the traditional and religious schools.

It should be noted that the French policy attempted to severely control the Koranic schools and limit the teaching of Classical Arabic. Indeed, Classical Arabic and Islam were considered as crucial factors that would lead to national consciousness that the colonial authorities were determined to fight energetically.

During the 1930's However, the French administration enacted a law which deemed Arabic a foreign language. This measure generated anger under the leadership of Ben Badis who deserved credit for being the first to define the Algerian identity as Arabo-Islamic.

France sought to impose its political as well as sociolinguistic control upon the Algerian speech community, using all possible means. The colonial administration for instance, saw in education the adequate environment where the French language and its socio linguistic norms could be widely and efficiently implemented.

During the period (1830-1962) education was oriented towards F and spending on, the study of CA declined drastically. F was considered as the language of instruction, a

modern language with a great future unlike CA which was the reflection of illiteracy and ignorance. When being taught in the French schools, CA was offered as an optional foreign language.

Since CA was cut off from contemporary intellectual and technological developments during the colonial era, it consequently failed to develop the flexibility and vocabulary needed for modern bureaucratic, financial and intellectual affairs. Furthermore, as part of a divide-and-rule policy, the Berbers (namely the Kabyles) of Algeria were favoured in education and employment in the colonial system and were represented in disproportionately large numbers in the French elite. Consequently, in the years after independence, they moved into all levels of state administration across the country, where they remained a large and influential group.

As a result of this, the leaders of the War of Independence (1954-62) and successive governments committed themselves to reviving CA and to establishing it as the national language. The aim was to recover the pre-colonial past and to use it, together with Arabic, to restore (if not create) a national identity and personality for the new state and population.

1.4 The Post Independence Era

Algeria had its independence on July, 5th 1962. The Algerian leaders especially the Nationalists soon adopted the following motto:

"L'islam est notre religion, l'Algérie est notre patrie, la langue Arabe est notre langue"

(Islam is our religion, Algeria is our mother country, Arabic is our language)

After independence, Algeria had an urgent need to regain its Arab and Muslim identity. Since Classical Arabic is the language of the Koran and Muslims throughout the Muslim speaking world and since the language is an instrument of power (*La langue est un instrument de pouvoir (Hadjarab, 2000:02)*), great campaigns of Arabisation were launched in order to replace French, the language of the colonizer with Classical Arabic

as the language of Arabo-Islamic identity. For the Algerian elite especially the nationalists, Classical Arabic was the best vehicle of communication and instruction without which Algeria would probably lose its identity and values.

Within this framework, President Boumediene (1968) (quoted in Bouhania, 1998: 26) declared:

"Sans la récupération de cet élément essentiel et important qui est la langue nationale, nos efforts resteront vains, notre personnalité incomplète et notre entité un corps sans âme"

(Without recovering that essential and important element which is the national language, our efforts will be vain, our personality incomplete and our entity a body without a soul).

This was probably an expected choice. Indeed, the Algeria society whose true identity had been denied for a hundred and thirty years, could not begin to reconstruct itself without restoring the bedrock of that identity; the Arabic language which remains a vivid symbol of its Arabic identity and Islamic values.

The group which was actively promoting the Arabisation process right after independence, consisted of Algerian nationalists and political leaders who were extremely anxious and eager to find out their place in an overwhelming French speaking setting.

Hence, the political leaders' first preoccupation was to build the Algerian identity upon two major points which are: Islam and Arabity. Such goals could not be achieved without an effective language policy.

In what follows, I will shed light on the Arabisation policy which was launched in various and multiple domains. Algeria inherited a heavy linguistic heritage of 132 years and the Arabisation process came to change such a situation. Arabisation as the term is understood in the Maghreb, means restoring the Arabic language. Several laws, decrees and ordinances were enacted, reinforced and applied aiming at implementing Classical Arabic and strengthening its position in all public domains

For the Algerian Francophones, the Arabisation policy was a real catastrophe since it reduced the status of French to a foreign language. However, for the Arabophones, Arabisation was a natural process led after independence to gradually replace French, the language of the enemy with Classical Arabic, the real reflection of Arabic culture and identity. Hence, the Arabisation process was featured by a long run clash between the defenders or the promoters of Classical Arabic and the advocates of the retention of French language. The former favoured Classical Arabic regarding it as an integrated and essential component of the Algerian personality. The latter gave priority to development claiming that Classical Arabic is an outdated language which cannot cope with modernism and technology. It is worthwhile to note that the Arabisation campaigns were concerned with almost all public fields and domains namely Education, Administration and Environment.

Arabisation was associated with two concepts: the War of Liberation and the defence of Islamic Values. President Boumedienne (1971, quoted in Grand Guillaume, 1983:120) said:

"L'Arabisation est un objectif révolutionnaire"
(Arabisation is a revolutionary objective)

Accordingly, Arabic was considered as the language of the freed nation, of Islam and the Algerian identity. French, was the language of the enemy and political leaders saw in Arabisation a real fight between freedom and colonialism; between Classical Arabic and French. Classical Arabic was progressively established in various domains such as in Administration and the Educational System. In the latter, Arabisation succeeded in the primary and secondary schools but partially failed at the university where French, remains the main medium of instruction and where Classical Arabic failure is essentially due to its inability to fit the modern scientific and technical expressions and issues .

Within this framework, Grand Guillaume (1996:13) points out:

"Nul ne conteste que l'Arabe soit 'la langue nationale' mais peu d'Algériens maîtrisent cet Arabe classique tant à l'oral qu'à l'écrit "

(No one contests that Arabic is 'the national language' but few Algerians master this Classical Arabic both the oral and the written one.)

Arabisation faced many criticisms among them the inability of Classical Arabic to cope with technology and modernity, that is why Arabisation partially failed in the technical, scientific and economic fields.

At the university, Arabisation created a great gap between students, teachers and worldwide documentation which was conveyed either in French, or English. Probably, the major obstacle to the development and promotion of Classical Arabic tightly lies within the great gap between political decisions and execution. Indeed, Arabisation as a goal is one thing and its implementation in a society is quite another thing.

The policy of Arabisation evolved in a hostile sociolinguistic environment and Classical Arabic which is the object of Arabisation comes into conflict with other languages especially French; the language of modernism, science and technology.

It should be noted that any political project related to language implementation in public domains should be preceded by a serious and pragmatic investigation; a study that would take into account the socio-cultural and linguistic environment in which language is in use. This would probably guarantee a safe departure and avoid the irreversible consequences of taking wrong decisions. In terms of language planning, such a study or investigation would have taken into consideration the state of Classical Arabic, its communicative potential, the domains in which it could be implemented and the consequences or the results of language restoration in particular domains. Although the project of Arabisation was politically motivated, it seems that it was almost deprived from human and sometimes material supports.

Arabisation faced other critics among them its inability to cope with other languages which exist in Algeria and its will to fiercely impose Classical Arabic as the sole medium of communication in the unified country. However, the reality is that the Algerian society is pluralist: in its regions, its languages, its attitudes to the past and the future, and its view of the west and the Arab world. So far, this diversity has never been properly acknowledged, in the context of a general will to live with one another.

2. The Linguistic Rights of Berbers

Right after independence, the successive Algerian governments took the task of reviving Classical Arabic and establishing it as the national language. The aim was to recover the pre-colonial past and eventually to restore a national identity and Arab Muslim personality of the newly freed nation. Such a policy of Classical Arabic implementation was supported by a vast majority of Algerians. Nevertheless, since the Arabisation project does not consider the Berber language as an integral part of it, the Berbers especially the Kabylis have intensified their efforts to slow down if not to halt the Arabisation campaigns.

During the 1970's and in attempt to Arabise the registry office, it was forbidden to give Berber names to new-borns. Interestingly enough, in June 1976 the publication of the periodical "*Fichier Berber*" (Berber File) was suspended by the Algerian authorities. This periodical was published by French missionaries and was concerned with the Berber culture and historical background.

Antagonistic sentiments between Berbers and the Algerian government became explosive in the "Tamazight Spring" of 1980. Riots were set off when a renowned Berber writer, Mouloud Mammeri, was barred by local Algerian authorities from giving a lecture on ancient Kabyle poetry at the University of Tizi Ouzou. The censoring of Mammeri provoked a strong reaction by the Berbers of the Kabyles, who accused the government of repressing Berber culture. Following the cancellation of Mammeri's lecture, Berber students demonstrated in Algiers and throughout Kabylia, calling for freedom of expression and for recognition of the Berber language and culture.

The main instruments to reach their goals have been political protests, massive demonstrations and general strikes. Comparing with the 1960's and 1970's protests, the number of demonstrations remarkably increased since 1991. Indeed, when on July 5th, 1991, a controversial law has come into force making Classical Arabic the only language to be used in official documents and other areas of public life. Thus, fury exploded in the Berber speaking regions and the Berber anger swiftly turned against the

state and its Arabisation policy. Within this framework, Grand Guillaume (1996:11) said:

"Pour les Berberes, cette loi 'scélérate' a pour but non seulement d'accélérer et d'intensifier le processus d'Arabisation mais surtout de supprimer définitivement le Berbère"

(For the Berbers, this scoundrel' law aims at not only accelerating and intensifying the Arabisation process but also at suppressing definitely Berber)

Berber activists assert that the new law is a heavy-handed attempt by the government to reaffirm its Arabic identity and at the same time to shore up with its nationalist credentials. Supporters of Arabisation on the other hand, argue that recognising Berber as an official language would probably undermine Arabic and leave French as the only language shared by all Algerians. Interestingly enough, in some Kabylia regions, French is even more important due to the fact that many Kabyliaans have been educated by French missionaries or have worked in France. In Kabylia, Arabic (Classical Arabic) is often regarded as the third language. What the Berbers demanded and are till nowadays demanding, is the recognition of Berber as one of the national and official languages in Algeria. They also ask for a linguistic and cultural autonomy; the recognition of Berber as the first language in the Berbophone areas.

The Berbers 'main claims are to preserve their customs; to cherish their heritage and to promote their language Berber with its various varieties. They also ask to strengthen their thousand year old identity and to prevent its dissolution and eradication.

As a fairly concession from the Algerian government, in 1995 President Liamine Zeroual, wanting to woo the Kabyle political parties, set up a body attached to the presidency called "Le haut commissariat à l'amizighité" (the High Office of Amazighity'. The latter was founded in order to defend the linguistic rights of Berbers and revive their linguistic heritage through cultural meetings, manifestations and concerts.

2.1 The High Commission of Amazighity

The high Commission of Amazighity focused on teaching Amazigh (Berber) language and history. Its president Mr Mohamed Idir Aït, officially announced the basic recommendations needed to give Tamazight its legitimate dimension:

- ❖ First, it is necessary for the language to obtain national and official status. The state must find ways and means to tailor a language policy in tune with the institutional and constitutional texts. Moreover, teaching the language must be mandatory, as required by society.
- ❖ The second important point is the internal set up of the language. A linguistic set up centre, monitoring and defending the efforts made to assimilate the language should be created.
- ❖ The third recommendation concerns teaching the language. The education ministry is vested with the task of administering historical reparation of a language that has been marginalized for so long.
- ❖ The fourth point is devoted to the diffusion of the language through socialisation. The teaching of Tamazight has meaning only if it is utilised as an instrument for social, cultural and economic interaction.

In addition, specialists opted for historical revisionism in order to re-establish historical truth, which has been ignored for years. Researchers and historians must revise the content of the school manuals so they will be more appealing and conform to historical reality. Furthermore, the teaching of certain disciplines in Tamazight will help the language integrate into the linguistic culture.

For the time being, Berber is taught in some primary and secondary schools such as in Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou. Moreover, the Algerian Television is broadcasting a daily edition in one of the three main Berber dialects in addition to cultural societies centres which have been established to promote the teaching and the popularisation of Berber language and culture through Mass Media and via Internet.

2.3 The Berber Linguistic Autonomy

Seemingly, for many linguists and Berber activists, the linguistic situation of Berbers cannot be solved unless the Algerian government recognises the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Berberophones areas. GrandGuillaume (1996:13) states :

"L'intolérance à l'égard du Berber...trahit l'incapacité partielle du pouvoir Algérien à construire la nation en tenant compte de son triple héritage Arabe, Berber et occidental"

(The intolerance towards Berber...betrays the partial incapacity of the Algerian power to build the nation taking into account its triple heritage Arabic, Berber and occidental)

Following the Berber demands, The Berber language should be recognised as the proper language of Kabylia because this regional recognition is the only one capable of insuring the perpetuity of the language in the long duration, but it does not mean that it is necessary to renounce the national objective: Tamazight should also be recognised in the Algerian Constitution as one of the national and official languages of Algeria, with the right for every citizen to use the Berber language, in all circumstances of public life, and to receive an education in this language, including outside Berberophone areas. However, such demands have not been satisfied and remain far from the actual linguistic situation of Berbers.

So, How can the Kabyles, other than the auxiliaries of the central 'pouvoir' (power) recognise a state whose Constitution affirms that the sole national and official language is Arabic? A State, which offers them, as their only prospect, a slow death as Berberophones and assimilation by Arabisation with, at the most--after twenty years of open fighting--a graphic museum and folkloric recognition. And to refer to "our ancestors, the Berbers," while an ultrarepressive law of generalisation of the Arabic language is promulgated, does not constitute recognition, but a careful burial.

2.4 The Actual Linguistic Situation of Berbers

The Berber demands laid out in 1980 had actually originated in 1967, the year in which the Berber Academy was established in Paris to alphabetise the Berber language. The demands of 1980 thus represented deep-seated and profound grievances associated with political disillusionment with the Algerian state and ideological disaffection with the Algerian society. Today, Berbers vigorously oppose Arabisation and demand recognition of Tamazight as their national language, which they have spoken for 5000 years and which has become the foundation of their collective identity. They also demand respect for the Berber culture. Their demands correspond closely to those enumerated in the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

More than twenty years on, since the spring of 1980, an unprecedented wave of protest, in the Berber-speaking regions of central Algeria has shown the Berber's determination to achieve their sociolinguistic as well as cultural aims.

On 3 October 2001, a government statement announced that the Constitution will be amended to make Tamazight a national language. This is of course news of prime importance. However, in the current situation it raises a certain number of questions such as:

- ❖ What form will this constitutional amendment will take?
- ❖ What space will there be for Tamazight?
- ❖ What uses will it have as a national language alongside CA the national and official language?

In announcing that the Berber language is to become a national language under the constitution, the authorities run the risk of favouring the status of Berbers especially Kabylians (about 8 % of the population) over the rest of population which would probably imitate Berbers and undertake the same process for the recognition of their local dialects such like AA as a further national language.

3. Towards a conclusion

In reality, the linguistic policy pursued by Algerian politicians has always been dictated primarily by political objectives. But aside from these imperatives, the authorities showed no interest in the educational side and no great desire to give Arabic (Classical Arabic) its true value by encouraging the historical research and reflection. The historical development of languages in Algeria is a genuine reflection of the sociolinguistic richness of such a country whose diversity should be respected to be better preserved. Even with the great and intensive campaigns of Arabisation, in order to give to Algeria an 'Arab face', Algeria is still a fantastic sociolinguistic mosaic, full of social and linguistic similarities, and sometimes contradictions, which makes this country, in first rank among the most culturally, but also linguistically diverse and amazingly rich countries in the world.

As Algerians, and as Arabs, we have already lost the financial, economic richness, what remains to us, is our culture and linguistic heritage; the only richness that we own and we can control, so, at least let's be proud of it in order to protect and preserve it!

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