

BILINGUALISM IN ALGERIA AND THE MAKING OF THE NATION

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1. Introduction

Our paper will be dealing with the issue of language in Algeria and the process known as the *making of a nation*. It seems necessary to point out a few historical milestones to throw some light on the process itself and on the different periods that both language and nation have been through.

2. A glance at history

The Algerian case stands as a dynamic phenomenon of contact situation which started as early as 1830, i.e., when the French settled in the country. Prior to the French settlement, the Spanish presence is historically and linguistically clearly attested particularly to the West and on the coastal areas which were known as a commercial route for Spanish, Italian, British and Levantine sea-traders. The Spanish presence in Algeria was a way of neutralizing the Turkish piracy harboured by the North-African coastal shelters. It is not our purpose to dwell on this specific period of the Algerian history proper but we feel compelled to state that it was not clear who was the dominant ruler in the political mosaic of Algeria from the 1500's to the 1800's, although the Ottoman power officially included Algeria among its provinces.

It is however necessary to mention that the Spanish presence as it developed triggered a fertile process of lexical borrowing that pervaded the vernacular².

To a lesser extent, though for the same historical and geographical reasons, an Italian impact on both the culture and the medium is to be attested too in the East of the country.

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² See Zoulikha Hassaine (Bensafi): Ph.D Thesis, University of Bath, Department of Modern Languages.

It is a platitude of historians when dealing with Algeria to observe two periods, irremediably distinct, and in which 1830 stands as a caesura. Though there is some truth in such a distinction, the arbitrariness and despotism of dates should be of limited relevance when attempting a linguistic investigation proper. Understandably, the linguist's criteria should take into consideration historical dates and acknowledge the irreversible character of events, but only in so far as these dates and events sustain the underlying explanations to the changes and phenomena affecting the language and the society being analyzed.

3. The contact situation

The interplay between languages has always aroused the interest of linguists. Since it is accepted that a particular language will reflect the culture of the society for which it is a medium of expression, language problems have also attracted sociologists. The two languages at stake in the making of the Algerian nation are clearly and primarily Arabic and French. This statement stands for a simple, straightforward dichotomy which calls for the label bilingualism as defined by Fishman (1967, 1973, 1980).

Though pertinent, such an observation seems highly reductive for it excludes at first hand the diglossic dimension that prevails in the Algerian situation as far as Arabic is concerned. It also excludes other linguistic aspects that characterize this particular speech community as for example other forms of bilingualism namely Berber-Arabic, Berber-French not to mention trilingual situations that indeed cannot escape our analysis.

Measured by the yardstick of history, the French colonization which lasted a hundred and thirty-two years seems relatively short. Yet, the consequences to this day, of the French impact –political, social, cultural and linguistic– are so strong as to appear indelible. The long and sustained spreading of French language and culture, had gradually succeeded in maintaining Algeria as a stronghold until its independence.

France had extended a total domination, blanking out the indigenous way of life by enforcing laws and courts, administrations and schools. To this day and despite massive and intensive, continuous policies and programmes of Arabization, one can

notice that even the indigenous populations of rural areas –one would have thought exempt from direct contact with the French culture– had been affected. That the influence of this presence did not cease with independence, is undeniable and may explain the complex nature of the changes and readjustments that Algeria as a new nation has been undergoing to this day.

Those natives who had the opportunity of learning French at school automatically contributed to the creation of the “élite”. But those who from the depth of total illiteracy –in both Arabic and French– had to have recourse to the French vocabulary precipitated the phenomenon of heavy borrowing which still affects –not to say characterizes– the Algerian vernacular. This leads us to say that one may encounter various types and degrees of bilingualism in Algeria, each worth a thorough examination.

Historians, linguists and sociologists alike, baffled or interested, should follow this itinerary to understand the ambivalent Algerian culture and society. But also to come to terms with the fluxes and instability that characterize this dynamic process of making a nation, this nation.

4. Language, school and identity

Any approach to the French schooling policy in Algeria will remain incomplete without reference to Jules Ferry, who, when Minister of Public Instruction in the 1880’s, introduced free, compulsory and “laïque” education. Jules Ferry believed the school to be one of the pacifist and effective weapons for transforming a society, and evoked the idea of “la civilisation progressive par l’école” (Ageron, 1980: 72).

Not surprisingly, policy-makers of independent Algeria had defined and strongly defended school and education for all, as a means to free the “benighted” Algerians from French assimilation and alienation.

Similarly, Arabic had to regain its prestige and value and elbow out the French language that had pervaded (not just the language but) all walks of life during the French period.

The French schooling policy had a direct influence on traditional education as it existed prior to the French settlement. Arabic was taught in the Koranic schools known

as the *zawiyat*³ and the *medaris*⁴, a more advanced level of proficiency. Even the Berber populations who strongly maintained Tamazight and other varieties of it, as their exclusive means of communication among themselves, did not show much reluctance to send their offspring to those Koranic schools. The Berber populations had been islamised for a long time and for their great majority. The small number of Koranic schools, the high rate of illiteracy restricted recourse to Classical Arabic, the high form of the language, to religious settings and functions. This explains the survival and preservation of Arabic in colonial Algeria in its oral form since access to the written one was very limited.

The separation between mosque and school, as redefined by the French, reflected a radical division between the temporal and the spiritual once closely inter-related and inter-dependent in the natives' philosophy.

The closing down of those Koranic schools and the feeling of having a new system imposed on them, and at the same time, of being deprived of their heritage developed from sporadic revolts against the French into a national united front for the safe-guarding of Islam and Arabic.

Not surprisingly these two elements stood as central, focal issues in the war declared against both French power and the French language. Not only did language and religion shape the natives' mind and dream for freedom, but they also continued to serve the struggle of recovering lost identity and dignity, as much as they swayed all the successive educational policies of independent Algeria.

5. The legacy of the past

Napoleon III directed his objectives towards the creation of a mixed school which could work as a preparatory institution leading to a peaceful co-existence of French and Arabic. Although it was not clearly stated in terms of a *bilingual* education, his conception of "civilisation" reflected an idea of complementariness rather than domination.

³ From *zawiyatun*:singular

⁴ From *madrasatun*:singular

The outcome of the first measure was the creation of imperial colleges which produced the first generation of the Algerian bilingual élite, including Muslim administrators dealing with Muslim jurisdiction and civil matters, such as the qadis⁵, interpreters and bilingual teachers. These colleges opened the path to several similar schools –all over the country later known as “Collèges Franco-musulmans”. The importance of this major step in the policy of assimilation gave a new status to the Madrasa (previously known as a Muslim college of higher education) transforming it henceforth into a continuation of the “école arabe-française”.

It seems necessary at this stage of our paper to argue that bilingualism in this case is a salient characteristic of these first schools and reflected the intentions the French had about the training of a bilingual élite which they believed could be used as intermediary between them and the most reluctant natives. It is the same élite wrought in the “laïque” education system that expanded later over the century, that forged the prototype of the natives who were to become the decision-makers of independent Algeria.

Further possibilities and methods of training natives to become teachers in “Écoles Normales” as well as teaching materials and programmes were at the heart of the social reforms. The bilingual type of education, along with some special schools called “écoles indigènes” and “écoles gourbis”⁶ paved the way for the final stage of the fusion between the two educational systems which took place between 1944 and 1946.

But despite all these efforts to make room for some Arabic, French as a language was represented through a French institution (the school) and was part and parcel of the French domination over Algeria.

It could therefore only be regarded and felt as a dominant language, and had, by the end of the century, considerably altered and weakened the status and prestige of Arabic.

⁵ Muslim judge.

⁶ A gourbi is a small rural habitation.

6. Language and power

As Chomsky puts it “questions of language are basically questions of power” (1979: 191), while Steinberg echoes him in his own words when he argues that the “language question flickers in and out of the constant interplay between culture and power” (Steinberg, 1987: 206).

The French tried to assimilate the natives by bringing them to their culture and language. The natives had after a century of domination and in the midst of the ‘Nahda’ (the Renaissance of the Arab world) of the 1920’s, clustered around the belief that the language issue, should stand at the core of their claims. Arabic was to oppose French, but it was also to enshrine the search for identity. Rightly so, the Algerian case and urge for independence fed the agitation of the Panarab movements. But the frenchified élite voiced their claims in what they called “the language in which the message could be expressed” i.e. French.

Even the “Ulema”, leaders of nationalist, religious, conservative movements were convinced of the immediate usefulness, utilitarian function of the French language.

Voices for equality and independence welcomed bilingual speeches and messages, and encouraged the publishing of papers and bulletins in French and Arabic. The intricate links between history, identity and religion put on language a heavy burden. Besides, the temptation to manipulate language was high on both sides. Language –whether French or Arabic– became instruments, tools. The bilingual dimension –per se– took the contours of a conflict. Besides, Arabic being the language of the Koran, worked as a cement for revolutionary movements and nationalist claims.

It is in these terms that one should understand the explicit ideological salience that prevails when dealing with language issues in Algeria.

The high degree of illiteracy in Arabic among the native populations did not weaken the symbolic weight of the language. Prior to independence, those who did not have access to the written form of the medium, still maintained a continuous use in everyday linguistic practices.

The link between religion, nationalism and language in the case of Algeria, is not an isolated case. Similar situations have been attested in Great Britain for example, vis-à-vis the Welsh, Scottish or Irish question (see Grillo, 1990). But as opposed to

Britain where language could be the basis for nationality, in Algeria language has always enshrined a trilogical power: religion, ethnic and linguistic.

7. French versus Arabic: The conflictual making of this nation

Naïve observers and analysts would be inclined to jump to the conclusion that the process of Arabization should have paralleled that of building an Algerian nation free from the hybrid, mosaic-like features the French presence had carved in the language, the people and the culture.

But the language issue, once the pride of the nation, had gradually developed into an intense passionate unsolved debate. The complexities of the enterprise –that of building a nation– reflect the complex structure of the composite nature of the Algerian society.

Arabization was thought of as the legitimate choice to repossess the fundamentals of the original culture and identity. Any counter attitude was de facto to be regarded as an anti-nationalistic, anti-patriotic attitude. Unfortunately, though valid and called for, such a restrictive policy did not tally with the ethnic, social and linguistic vitality and diversity of the situation. Nor did it gain the votes of the Berber communities who have always felt that their appartenance to the motherland should account for their specificities.

Besides, the urge for economic and technological development so characteristic of all newly dependent countries among which Algeria, dictated the preservation of French if only as the medium to have access to the West.

Gradually, French had to be, if not eradicated, at least redefined within the balance between language and power, for it had obviously crystallised more than a century of colonial activity and domination.

New educational programmes promoting English were designed and enforced as an attempt to reduce the impact of French at all levels of schooling, research, science and technology. In concrete terms, the teaching load allocated to French, was little by little reduced as early as primary school. At university level arabization struck primarily social sciences. Understandably, the newly independent Algeria could not claim to have

the necessary qualified staff to cover all the tuition in scientific and technological areas which maintained French for teaching.

But policy makers had indeed relied on the collaboration of primary and secondary level teachers from Middle-Eastern or neighbouring countries for whom Arabic was the language of education.

The spreading of Arabic through teaching and the media was a measure to please the great defenders of homogenous arabization. But it was far from realistic as bilingualism was indeed societal and the geographical proximity of France had to be taken into account too. The revival of Arabic, like in the case of Irish since the independent State of the 1920's, was to be enshrined in the core of constitutional politics, despite the undeniable presence of both French language and culture. For many Algerians the politics of arabization was one of prestige to be regained and a response to the symbols of the struggle for independence. But on the other hand, the attraction for French culture and the dream to become fluent, in both Arabic and French, paved the way to the phenomenon of language maintenance in the midst of the process of language shift that this country was undergoing.

For the younger generations, educated in the Algerian school system, French was not so foreign a language, as it was part and parcel of the linguistic environment. Radios and the press made ample room for the use of French. And this was unavoidable, since Arabic could not overnight replace completely French. The latter was spoken in homes and its presence and impact witnessed in the vernacular through heavy lexical borrowing. Complete linguistic and cultural replacement could only therefore, be more of a mental, collective idea, than a concrete policy.

8. Conclusion

The introduction of English in curriculae, as the medium of science and technology had very little effect on the mass of the Algerian population. Again this was only a political tactics, a policy of replacement based on the idea that English could be more accepted, because void of direct colonial implications, at least for the Algerians, and could slowly elbow out the French language on the one hand. It was thought to be the means to ease the tension of the violent linguistic conflict focusing on French, on

the other hand. But the indelible impact of French could only sustain and feed the phenomenon of irreversible societal bilingualism.

These measures had temporarily calmed down the repeated claims from the ultra-nationalist movements for a tougher generalization of Arabic who welcomed the substitution of French by English under the pretence that English was a faster way to scientific development and a gate to multilingualism which would eventually lead the nation towards international recognition.

The New World Order with its economic constraints has urged the Algerian decision makers to revise not just their policies but their interpretation of the past as well. After four decades of independence and four decades of total refusal to join the Francophonie, the Algerian government has on October 17th, 2002, officially attended the Beyrouth summit on Francophonie, for the first time ever in the history of independent Algeria. In his own words the Algerian president declared French to be an asset and no longer a problem for and in the making of this nation. This is indeed a major political step and an historical one too. But for the linguist, it is a new phase in the state of bilingualism, as defined in Algerian terms. After a series of fluxes and a great instability, it seems that the path towards a more stable, effective bilingual state is being paved, all the more that as from September 2002, educational programmes, officially include French as early as the second year of primary school.

Could we therefore come to the conclusion that in this particular context, the irreversible process of arabization has failed? Or could we simply state that the impact of the French language and culture have contributed to the phenomenon of language maintenance.

What could already be attested is that school children in Algeria, do not feel they are discovering a new language, when studying French, but that they are somehow improving their “native acquaintance”, targetting near native performance.

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