

## **ALGERIA: AN INTRICATE BILINGUAL AND DIGLOSSIC SITUATION**

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In studying multilingual speech communities, some sociolinguists have attempted to devise a sociolinguistic ‘typology’ of languages as Ferguson (1959) did before to offer a sociolinguistic profile formula for a given political unit. He classified languages according to the political or social status given to these that qualifies them as being official, national and other standard or vernacular, etc. For the Algerian sociolinguistic profile, Arabic language is the national and official language, and it usually appears in its two forms: classical Arabic and dialectal Arabic. Classical Arabic, the language of the Koran is considered as a dead language and is replaced by Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), which is simpler and therefore, more appropriate for educational purposes. On the other hand, Dialectal Arabic is the spoken variety and is used spontaneously by the Algerian speaker to express his feelings, thought and to communicate. In parallel, the French language goes with Arabic and is mainly used in education, administrative institutions, and many different domains such as finance, army, industry and social life. It is recognised covertly as the second official language. The Berber, or Tamazight, variety is not largely used. The major Berber groups are the Kabyles of the Kabylie mountains (east of Algiers) and the Chaouia of the Aures range (south of Constantine), and other smaller groups including Mzab and Tuareg (south Algeria). One must bear in mind that the Berber dialects have been preserved in these regions in spite of the widespread Arabization that accompanied the Muslim migration, especially as a result of the Muslim settlements that took place mostly during two periods:

- The Arab conquest of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- The migration of great numbers of Arab nomads in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

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We will deal with the linguistic situation in Algeria first through the co-existence of Arabic and French, since it deals with two languages totally different: Arabic belonging to the Semitic family and French to the Indo-European Family, and then the diglossic situation as a typical characteristic of the Arabic speaking countries in general and Algeria in particular.

The Algerian population was so deeply influenced linguistically during the French occupation that, today more than 40 years after the independence (1962), French language continues to play an important role in spoken as well as written domains. In fact, in addition to the great number of French loanwords that have slipped into Algerian Arabic, being adopted phonologically, and to a lower extent semantically, many Algerian people understand French and use it in day to day interactions.

The Algerian bilingualism is a special one. It is the result of the long gradual occupation of the whole country by the French, with more concentration on the northern part. In fact, bilingualism in Algeria is not homogeneous since not all the population is bilingual. In many parts of the country we can find monolinguals. It is much more practised in the cities where there is a high contact of Arabic with French, high level and high style of life. During the colonial and post-independence periods, the majority, if not all, of the Algerians without mentioning their educational and cultural level, were bilinguals contrary to nowadays where bilingualism is much more common among those who went to school, and those who were in contact with French language.

Another characteristic of Algerian bilingualism is that it is subtractive because Arabic is replacing progressively French in many domains: education, politics, and administration. After the independence, the Algerian policy began to generalize, step by step, Arabic under 'Arabization laws', since it is the native language, the soul of nationalism and associated with religion. The role of French in the social life of the Algerians started to change. Two different periods are to be mentioned. In the pre-independence period those who were in contact with French people were qualified as more balanced bilinguals. Unbalanced bilinguals, however, are those who came after and whose competence is higher in one language than the other and generally in the mother tongue. The generation after 1970, indeed has less competence in French.

Another distinction is between active and passive bilinguals. An active bilingual is one who has an active ability in productive and receptive skills even if he does not

read or write. The pre-independence uneducated individuals were active bilinguals because they could speak and understand French. Whereas a passive bilingual has a passive ability, i.e. he understands French but does not speak it. This is the case for the Algerian immigrants in France, they master French but, unfortunately, they have not the ability to speak their parents' mother tongue, though they are able to understand it.

Bilingualism in Algeria is the result of educational strategy and social specificity. It is a co-ordinate bilingualism which emerges in the country, because children learn both Arabic and French in primary school. The learner develops two systems of meaning of words, one system for the words he knows in the first language and the other is for the words he knows in the second language. In other words, languages are learnt separately and are more or less independent. So, the French word and the Arabic word will be stored and represented in the brain independently. They would not be associated. This idea of possessing two systems has been reported by Spolsky (1998: 48) when he defines this linguistic competence and says:

For a number of years, there was an attempt to distinguish between compound bilinguals whose two languages were assumed to be closely connected, because one language had been learned after (and so through) the other, and co-ordinate bilinguals who had learned each language in separate contexts and so kept them distinct.

The linguistic situation is so intricate that the Algerians speak two minutes in French, thirty seconds in Arabic then one minute in French and so on. Sometimes the two languages are mixed to such a point that the result is a bizarre unintelligent language. This mixture swings between a bilingual situation and a diglossic one. The Algerian diglossic case is very particular since the low variety is not very close to the high variety. Illiteracy and colonisation are the main factors behind this gap.

The language used at home, for low functions, is a local version of Arabic. The language recognized publicly in formal situations, for high functions, is Modern Standard Arabic which takes its normative rules from the classical Arabic of the Koran. The 'high' and 'low' varieties differ from each other:

...not only in grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, but also with respect to a number of social characteristics, namely function, prestige, literary heritage, acquisition, standardization, and stability. (Romaine, 1994: 46)

Romaine means that, grammar is one of the most striking differences between the high and low varieties. There is probably wide agreement among linguists that the high variety has grammatical categories not present in the low variety and it has an

inflectional system of nouns and verbs which is much reduced or totally absent in the low variety. We teach at schools the formal language which is the high variety and we cannot teach the low variety simply because it lacks grammar.

Lexis is, too, different. The bulk of vocabulary of high form and low form is shared but with variation in form and differences of use and meaning. However, the high form should include in its total lexicon technical terms and learned expressions but they do not have their regular equivalents in the low variety, and vice versa, i.e. there are some popular expressions and names of homely objects in the low form but not in the high form.

The two varieties are not only different in terms of structural features but also in terms of some social features that characterize diglossia. One of the most important features of diglossia is the specialization of function for the high and low varieties. In one set of situations only the high variety is appropriate and in another only the low one. It depends on the situation. For example in the mosque the high variety is used, and in family and friends conversations the low variety is appropriate.

As far as prestige is concerned, Arabic language speakers regard the high form as superior to the low one in a number of respects. Sometimes the feeling is so strong that the high variety is regarded as real and the low variety as if it does not exist. Even when strong feelings do not exist, still the high variety is seen as more logical, more beautiful, and better in expressing important thoughts.

The communicative tensions which arise from the diglossia situation may be resolved by the use of relatively un-codified, unstable, intermediate forms of the language, and repeated borrowing of vocabulary items from high to low variety. A low variety that adults use in speaking to children and, therefore, the variety learnt, as one's mother tongue and part of the socialization process.

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