

Globalization, Language Planning, and the Future Prospect of English in Algeria

BENMOUSSAT Smail,
Université de Tlemcen

Abstract: *The classification of Algeria as a Uni-modal or Multi-modal nation is dependent on the particular group involved. Yet, the language decisions are made on the basis of nationalism rather than nationism, and besides the educational objectives of the Algerian School, the curriculum as a whole, has been molded to inculcate and engender feelings of nationalism as a counter to ethnicity. Needless to say, in multilingual contexts, language policies (whether explicit or implicit) often reflect a power relationship and serve a particular ideology. It is to this end that the school is important as part of the overall policy, because it reinforces the values, attitudes, and policies promoted by the state. However, in the light of the globalization process and to fully participate in the economic, professional, scientific and technological arenas respectively, a good working knowledge of the English language imposes itself de facto. What the future prospect of English in Algeria bearing in mind that an excellent command of it is very likely to lead to technological advancement, economic development and commercial expansion. The answer to this question will form the general lay-out of the present article.*

Key words: *globalization, language policies, education, English in Algeria, nationalism.*

Résumé: *La classification de l'Algérie en tant que nation uni-modale ou multimodale dépend du groupe particulier impliqué. Pourtant, les décisions de la langue sont faites sur la base du nationalisme plutôt que nationisme, et d'ailleurs les objectifs éducatifs de l'école algérienne, le programme dans son ensemble, ont été moulé à inculquer et d'engendrer des sentiments de nationalisme comme un contre de l'ethnicité. Inutile de dire que, dans des contextes multilingues, les politiques linguistiques (explicites ou implicites) reflètent souvent une relation de pouvoir et servent une idéologie particulière. Il est à cet effet que l'école est importante dans le cadre de la politique globale, car elle renforce les valeurs, les attitudes et les politiques promues par l'Etat. Toutefois, à la lumière du processus de mondialisation et de participer pleinement dans les arènes économiques, professionnels, scientifiques et technologiques, respectivement, une bonne connaissance pratique de la langue anglaise s'impose de facto. Qu'elle est la perspective d'avenir de l'anglais en Algérie en gardant à l'esprit qu'une excellente maîtrise de l'Anglais est susceptible de conduire à l'avancement technologique, le développement économique et l'expansion commerciale. La réponse à cette question va former le lay-out général du présent article.*

Mots clefs: *globalisation, politiques linguistiques, Anglais en Algérie, nationalisme.*

Introduction

Arguably, two conflicting views exist in analyzing the linguistic situation in Algeria: one held by politicians, is that Arabic is the

national and official language of the country, and French is a foreign language (in terms of status planning). In other terms, the political view claims that Algeria is a monolingual nation, while the linguistic view considers Algeria a bilingual country; some others take this step further so that to assert that Algeria is a multilingual country. This assertion is made on the basis that there exists in Algeria another indigenous speech variety: *Tamazight* spoken in many parts of the country. Semi-officially, if it may be said so, it is assigned the status of a second national language. Needless to say, in multilingual contexts, language policies (whether explicit or implicit) often reflect a power relationship and serve a particular ideology. It is to this end that the school is an important part of the overall policy, because it reinforces the values, attitudes, and policies promoted by the state.

1. Language policy in Algeria

This policy started with the implementation of the Arabisation process in the early 1970s and overtly reinforced by the Algerianisation of the teaching staff some years later.

Yet, the question of what language to use as the medium of instruction in Algerian schools was one of the major decisions in language-in-education planning. As Hartshone (1987:63) points out:

Language policies are highly charged political issues and seldom if ever decided on educational grounds alone... this is particularly true of the experience of bilingual and multilingual countries, where decisions on language in education have to do with issues of political dominance, the protection of the power structure, the preservation of privilege.

From a sociolinguistic standpoint, the promotion of a language as the language of wider communication provides a certain degree of linguistic homogeneity which, in turn, allows for quicker and better communication. These two outcomes can be considered as noble aims only if a society wishes to allow equal access to economic and political power to all of its citizens. In Algeria, however, the promotion of language-in-education policy through the large-scale Arabisation process has not been carried out with great seriousness of intent and commitment. In fact, “*Arabisation ... has been made, from the start, the target of the hijacking maneuvers instigated by political bodies or even individuals*” (Miliani, 2003:55). The plain purpose of this policy was partly to discard and marginalize the francophone élite, and to aid in the eradication of minority

languages, not least *Tamazight* spoken by one fifth of the population (representing some 7.5 million in four main groups: the Kabyles, the Shawiya, the Mzabis and the Tuaregs).

The likely outcome of such a 'linguistic cleansing' has monolingual and monocultural agendas the regaining of a lost identity and the re-Arabisation or even the re-Islamisation (Grandguillaume, 1983). Worse still, from the psychological standpoint, the precipitate valuation of Arabic vis-à-vis French and the other local varieties created a situation of general malaise which can be described in terms of linguistic imperialism. Here the notion of imperialism is similar to that of Phillipson (1992), but one might argue that Phillipson's terminology is slightly patronizing.

Admittedly, one of the major benefits of language planning is by promoting the use of a particular language; it can foster a sense of national consciousness, thus reinforcing the political unity of the country. Paradoxically, in Algeria the promotion of Arabic as the national and official language has had a divisive effect; it has undermined rather than strengthened political unity. Thus, the government policy of promoting a national identity through its Arabisation process has not resulted in political unity, but engendered resistance and, at times, great hostility among some members of the society; the famous 1980-Berber Spring is one aspect of the fragility that characterizes Algeria's notion of national pride and unity. This also shows the complex relationship between language planning, nationalism and political unity. On the other hand, it gives a fair picture of the pan-Berber identity clinging tenaciously to their distinctive culture and language.

The friction caused by the use of Arabic in schools and some public sectors has made language policy a thorny and very sensitive issue. These changes in language policy have systematically affected the role and status of French in Algeria. Consequently, the use of Arabic as a language of wider communication is on the increase. Similarly in the public sector, since all the official documents must be written in Arabic, the use of French is on the wane. In short then, the policy of favouring Arabic, explicitly, has devalued the French language, and to a lesser extent, the other indigenous languages. Some proponents and reform-initiators of the Arabisation policy have, at times, felt obliged to closely associate the revival of classical Arabic with not only the demise of the French language, but to the down-grading of their own mother tongue: Algerian dialectal Arabic or Berber.

However, the value of the French language as an important international language has continued to be recognized. French is to be kept as a second language. But the term “second language” as used to refer to French in the Algerian context has to be qualified, as it does not refer to a second language in the true linguistic sense. Instead the term is used to mean that French is second to Arabic in importance for official purposes. It is in keeping with this policy of maintaining French as a second language that it is still taught as a compulsory subject in primary and secondary education. Thus it is that Taleb Ibrahimi (1995:50) argues that:

Oscillating constantly between the status of a second language and that of a privileged foreign language, between the denial, the expressiveness of its symbolic power and the reality of its use, the ambiguity of the place assigned to the French language is one of the marked facts of the Algerian situation.

However, it is a common perception among some Algerians that the substitution of the French language by Arabic as the medium of instruction has led to falling educational standards. Actually, language-wise, a high percentage of students and graduates have developed a low level of language proficiency, which degenerated into what Brann (1990) has termed ‘semilingualism’, i.e. the inability to use fluently two different languages one is supposed to master. Knowledge-wise, the results are not any better in formal exams. On the other hand, one important issue in language planning is clearly the question of nationalism versus nationalism. The role and status of Arabic and French in Algeria are largely dependent on the political and social structure. Yet, this is not the only factor which influences language policies, equally important is the economic context which can promote or undermine the spread of a language.

2. The effect of language policy on Algerian school

The choice of a ‘national’ and ‘official’ language might appear, at first sight, to be a very simple one. The terms ‘national’ and ‘official’ are in quotation marks for a good reason: it is possible to follow Fishman (1971:32) and maintain the term ‘national language’ chosen for the achievement of nationalism, i.e. a language selected on basis of considerations of national identity, in contrast with the ‘official language’ which has the nationalism function, i.e. a language used in the business of government (legislative, executive, and judicial). However, the choice of Arabic placed a handful of its users, (not

speakers as L1) proportionally speaking at a substantial advantage. In this very specific context, Leibowitz notes that, *there is usually more at issue than just language, because decisions about language often lead to benefits for some and loss of privilege, status, and rights for others* (Leibowitz cited in Wiley 1996:104). The imposition of a one-language-only-policy has ever been more a problem than a solution.

There is a general consensus that the Arabisation process, implemented on the basis of political directives rather than linguistic or pedagogical criteria, has been fundamentally related to attempts to deprive the élite of access, status and power. Worse still, the proponents of the Arabisation policy have used a narrowly nationalistic ideology as a way to justify it, but as a source of legitimacy for any power they would get (Miliani 2003). In sum then, the noble socio-cultural project has deliberately been deviated from its original dimension, in the sense that Arabic has been manipulated for instrumental and goal-seeking reasons.

However, no sooner had the Arabisation process been launched that it confronted serious problems and turned out to be a problematical issue. Arguably, the most single important decision that might be taken to enhance the educational prospect of children would be for educational institutions to value and use the child's native language as resources in the classroom rather than as obstacles to learning. Many education specialists maintain that early education succeeds best if conducted in the child's native language. More than forty years ago, specialists at a UNESCO conference stated their unequivocal support for the use of mother tongue or vernacular education programmes in a now-classic statement: "*It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child to read is his mother tongue.*"

Arguably, such dramatic word- and sentence- level differences between Arabic and the local language varieties are significant enough to pose an instructional barrier. The Algerian school's primary task is to provide access to the language of wider use so that the child becomes a fully participating member of a wider community. Paradoxically, there was general agreement at a Cairo meeting that the low achievement rates in schools in many Arab countries are directly related to the difficulty of learning to read in Arabic. When transferred to the classroom Arabic, with its highly differentiated grammar and lexis from its dialectal varieties, poses serious pedagogical problems and feelings of insecurity among high numbers of pupils. On the other hand, many language scholars and education specialists have claimed that diglossia in the Arab region

should be blamed for the persistence of low literacy and the low levels of educational attainment that are reflected by frequent repetition, and high drop-out and non-completion rates. In Algeria, however, policymakers have always avoided accepting the existence of a diglossic situation, feeling that it could be a source of education inequity.

Because of the country's hurtful experience of French colonization, the educational authorities have always been extremely cautious vis-à-vis language policies. The French language, though officially regarded as the first foreign language, still fulfills the instrumental function in many higher education institutions and some activities of the regulative function. However, this imposed language is thought to have clouded the issue, adding complexity to a sociolinguistic situation characterized by a diglossic situation – Classical Arabic and Algerian dialectal Arabic- in addition to the emergence of *Tamazight* as a 'second national' language.

5. The status and future prospect of English in Algeria

What can be said about English within a global framework? As a global language, English has imposed itself in the Algerian education system. Its importance as an integral part of the school curriculum has led policy makers and educationalists to start its teaching in the 1st year of Middle School education when the child is aged between 10 and 12. Within the globalization framework, English has become the linguistic tool whereby the desire not to lag behind and be left out of the world is manifested. In his book *English as a Global Language*, Crystal (1997) explains how the British Empire has given way to the empire of English; the following quotation (Crystal 1997: 53) clearly puts light on the notion of global language:

The present-day status of English is primarily the result of two factors: the expansion of British colonial empire, which peaked towards the end of the 19th century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the 20th century. It is the latter factor which continues to explain the world position of the English language today.

Crystal has outlined various types of power which best explain why English has become dominant throughout the world; among those influences, he rightfully puts the spotlight on the military and economic supremacy of both Britain (in the 19th century) and the United States (in the 20th century) serving in this sense as key factor

in sustaining today's influence of the Anglo-American pole over the rest of world. Alongside with that, Ibn Khaldun, the famous Arab sociologist, pointed out in his *Al Mukadima*, '*The triumph of a language reflects its speakers' triumph and its position among languages expresses its position among nations*',

Conclusion

In very practical terms, it is through the English language that financiers, economists, scientists and academics are connected to the world's networks of finance, trade, industry and education. Thus, as one would expect, a sound knowledge of the English language becomes a *sine qua non condition* for success at every step. This pragmatic reality of the capital importance of English in virtually all fields of specialization goes all the way back to Kachru (1986), as shown by the following quote: "*In comparison with other languages of wider communication, knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science and travel. In short, English provides linguistic power*" (Kachru, 1985: 1). This quotation summarises the importance of English locally, regionally and globally.

References

BRANN, C.M.B. (1990-91), Pour une Métalangue du Multilinguisme. In *La Linguistique* (6), PUF, Paris, 43-45.

CRYSTAL, D. (1990), *The English Language*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd.

CRYSTAL, D. (1997), *English as a Global Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

CRYSTAL, D. (2001), *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

FISHMAN, J. A. (1972), *The Sociology of Language: An Interdisciplinary Social Science Approach to Language in Society*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.

GRANDGUILLAUME, G. (1983), *Arabisation et politique linguistique au Maghreb*. Edition GP Maisonneuve et Larose.

GRANDGUILLAUME, G. (1998), *L'Arabisation et la question des langues en Algérie*, (CDL- LIDILEM) Université Stendhal, Grenoble.

HARTSHONE, K.B. (1987) 'Language policy in African education in South Africa, 1910-1985, with particular reference to the issue of medium of instruction, In Young, D. (Ed.), *Bridging the Gap*, Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.

KACHRU, B. B. (1985), Standards, codification and sociolinguistic realism: The English language in the outer circle'. In Quirk, R & H.G. Widdowson (Eds.), *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

MILIANI, M. (2001), Teaching English in a multilingual context: The Algerian case, *Mediterranean Journal of Educational studies* 6(1), 13-29.

PHILLIPSON, R. (1992), *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

TALEB IBRAHIMI, K. (1995), *Les Algériens et leur(s) Langue(s)*. Alger: Editions El Hikma.

WILEY, T.G. (1996), Language planning and policy, McKay, S.L. & Hornberger, N.H. (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.